

The general's bride

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32548819) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32548819>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Shadow and Bone (TV)
Relationship:	The Darkling Aleksander Morozova/Alina Starkov
Characters:	Alina Starkov , The Darkling Aleksander Morozova , Fedyor Kaminsky , Ivan (The Grisha Trilogy) , Genya Safin , David Kostyk , Mal Oretsev , Baghra (The Grisha Trilogy) , Kaz Brekker , Inej Ghafa , Jesper Fahey , Matthias Helvar , Nina Zenik
Additional Tags:	Hurt and comfort , marriage law , peace treaty marriage , Mutual Pining , Enemies to Lovers , author did not read the books , Author will not read the books , No beta we die like Grisha , Domesticity , Pregnancy , Smart Alina , POV Alina Starkov , alina finding out who she is , societal power and what one can do with it , Freindships
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The General's bride verse
Collections:	Darklina
Stats:	Published: 2021-07-13 Updated: 2023-01-01 Words: 120,954 Chapters: 32/?

The general's bride

by [Anuna](#)

Summary

For months she and Mal had been on the run. She kept her hair and her powers hidden, kept her hands and her face dirty in hope not to be recognized as the Sun Summoner. *That is our best chance, you cannot reveal yourself to anyone any more.* Mal had convinced her to stay invisible, unnoticeable, plain. But keeping herself invisible after learning how to shine had its cost.

Notes

Hello again - this idea has been haunting me for the past week, demanding to be written. I don't have a good track record with multichapter fics, so feel free to come and yell at me to continue. Anyway, I wanted to try my hand at something non-fluffy, something dealing with all the repercussions after season 1, and hopefully I can do this idea and these characters justice.

Comments are loved and appreciated.

Chapter 1

Everyone says love hurts, but that is not true. Loneliness hurts. Rejection hurts. Losing someone hurts. Envy hurts. Everyone gets these things confused with love, but in reality love is the only thing in this world that covers up all pain and makes someone feel wonderful again. Love is the only thing in this world that does not hurt. - Meša Selimović, Death and the Dervish

When she woke up to the sound of footsteps and the door creaking open, her right arm was numb and her eyes had almost forgotten what light was.

We do not summon from nothing, *he* had said ages, *eternities* ago. We call for what's already there, in the smallest particles - there is a matter to everything. Even to light. Alina was kept in the dark, with her right arm tied behind her back, and her left in front of her, with restricted ability to move. She could eat, but she could not touch her hands together. She could not summon. Her captors knew what to do, and they did it with cruel precision. They gave her enough food to keep her alive, little enough to keep her from being strong. This time they brought a lamp. The light which spilled from it, a substance as familiar as her own skin and breath, hurt her eyes. They were in uniforms, but she could not discern the color, nor their faces or their ranks.

Something was dropped near her feet. Something substantial, but not heavy. It took her a couple of moments to realize that it was a plain black dress.

"Put that on," a voice said. She knew that voice. It was the one whom others referred to as *Captain*.

"Will I?" she asked, realizing that her voice sounded worn and unfamiliar to her ears.

"I am not asking, *dear* Sun Summoner," the man said. "You will do as told."

"Or you will kill me?" Alina finally managed to blink away the daze, to finally look him in the face. It was plain and ordinary, nothing about it that could reveal him as a cruel man, had you not known anything about him.

He laughed. She felt the anger in her rise, but the power she learned to rely upon remained silent somewhere inside her. Tied and snuffed out, after months of not being called forth, of being hidden.

"It's not you whom I'll kill," he said. "But it's you who will *watch*."

She wanted to say something, to reply, but she knew that the discussion was over. That she would have to do whatever she was ordered to, or they would kill Mal.

Alina had no way of determining how much time had passed, how long since West Ravkan soldiers had captured them, but she knew that she wasn't strong enough to fight back or run. The captain ordered his men to untie her, and then she was forced to change. There was no way to tidy her hair, which fell all around her face. The only thing preserving her modesty was an old and dirty underdress which she had on when she fled the Little Palace.

That... that felt like it was centuries ago. She got dressed as quickly as she could, which was not quick at all, and then her hands were tied again, shackled with a piece of steel keeping her palms apart.

She realized she would be taken somewhere.

*

The room was bleak save for three wooden chairs and an empty table near the rear wall. The Captain pushed her inside, his hand rough on her shoulder as she crossed the distance from the door to the back of the room. Then he made her sit down. Alina did not protest, realizing how much her legs hurt from a walk up three flights of stairs - from the dungeons to... whatever this room was. This was a military facility, that much she could recognize, and rooms such as these were usually used to interrogate enemies. She feared to think further down that particular line of thought. She tried to sit still, she tried mightily not to fall over because she felt lightheaded and unsteady even seated like this. It was best to remain silent, silent and unnoticable, as impossible as that was, because even weak like this she was the Sun Summoner - an asset or a symbol which these men intended to use.

The door opened again.

Another man walked in - accompanied with several West Ravkan soldiers and a few others dressed in familiar dark uniforms - a man she instantly recognized - his red kefta, his dark hair carefully combed to the side, his usual kind smile absent from his face.

"Is this her?" the Captain asked and Alina looked up at Fedyor. His face was steel but his eyes were huge and serious. He took a step closer. "Stay where you are," the Captain said. "She is not yours yet."

"This is her," Fedyor claimed. "Miss Starkov -"

"She is the property of the West Ravkan military. You are *not* to speak to her."

It took a beat and then another to process what was being said, as relief washed briefly over her upon seeing a familiar face. Alina almost said Fedyor's name, but using her voice was too hard. The way the West Ravkan Captain spoke made her stay silent. She looked at Fedyor, his eyes expressive as always, but she couldn't read him. If he was here then, then... *he* was here too, wasn't he? Alina tried not to say his name in her mind, but the image of Aleksander's face, his dark eyes, his poise, his strength came unbidden to her. *She is not yours yet*, what did that mean?

"You cannot invoke the marriage law and expect the other side to just accept your offer without making sure the bride is in good health," Fedyor said.

Alina felt dizzy. She tried her best to keep her face impassive, just as Aleksander always did (except with her, but that was all a lie, wasn't it? Wasn't it?) but her eyes must have revealed something. She heard Fedyor speak, but her mind scrambled to properly understand. "You're asking for a peace treaty and offer a bride for our commander as a sign of goodwill. Do you truly want him to get a bride who is too weak to stand?"

"I thought your commander sent a heartrender," the Captain said. "He is getting his Sun Summoner. What better peace offering there might be?"

"He did send a heartrender. I can kill you on the spot. But I can also heal," Fedyor said, his voice firm and expression hard. He made a pause and Alina tried to slow her breathing. A bride for his commander, a marriage law? That, *that* had to mean just one thing. "I will honor our part of the treaty. You must honor the law."

The Captain stared for what seemed like an impossibly long time. Soldiers on both sides did as well, and Alina felt trapped at the center of it all.

"Alright," The Captain said. Fedyor stepped close and knelt in front of Alina, holding himself low so she did not have to lift her head to see him.

"It's alright," he said, whispering only for her to hear, placing his hand on the pulse point on her neck. She shivered. The first kind touch she felt in ages, one that didn't demean or hurt. He leaned close, his face near her hair. "We will get you out of here. You will soon be safe," he murmured.

Alina wanted to scream, but she couldn't. She felt the pull of his power as he sent it forward, felt her vision clear up, felt her strength slightly return. "Marriage law?" she managed to ask.

"A peace treaty assured by marriage of opposing sides," Fedyor said quietly. "The end of war for West and East Ravka, Miss Starkov."

Of course. She *knew* that. She remembered that from the history books and lessons, but over the course of the last century it fell out of practice.

And now? Her captors were going to hand her like a piece of meat to the man she ran away from, to the man she tried to stop, and failed.

As if sensing her thoughts, the Captain spoke. "I am certain, Miss Starkov, that you understand what is at stake.... for you."

She wanted to look up. She wanted to pierce that man with her eyes and burn him on the spot, for his polite words that hid a well placed threat. They would kill Mal, and they would make her watch. And right then and there she felt all of her resistance fail and die, somewhere on that bleak stone floor between her feet and Fedyor's boots.

Fedyor placed his hand on her shoulder, another bit of kindness. She wondered if someone could survive on tiny shreds of humanity like that. If she possibly could live as a wife of the man she hated. And then she wondered if she could watch Mal die, and then continue living with the weight of his death on her hands, and the memory of it forever in her soul.

"Yes," she said. And that was it. That was all that was necessary for her to say.

*

You and I are going to change the world, Aleksander had told her once.

She ran away from those words, because she didn't want to change the world in his image, and in accordance with his will. He would bend her to it, convince her that he was right, make her believe that expanding the Fold was the solution. She ran, just as she was advised, and where did that get her?

For months she and Mal had been on the run. She kept her hair and her powers hidden, kept her hands and her face dirty in hope not to be recognized as the Sun Summoner. *That is our best chance, you cannot reveal yourself to anyone any more*. Mal had convinced her to stay invisible, unnoticeable, plain. But keeping herself invisible after learning how to shine had its cost.

It seemed that whatever she chose, she was on the losing side.

And now she was being walked down those stairs again, and out of the West Ravkan garrison, through a heavy wooden gate. There, in the field, a company of Second Army standing at the ready, and between them and the stone walls that kept her stood Aleksander, with several of his men at his side.

She hadn't seen him in months. She had tried, so hard, not to even think of him. Seeing him right there, close enough to recognize the expression of his eyes, hit her like a shock. Fedyor glanced at her as her steps faltered, and Aleksander's eyes grew darker. She could *feel* his presence, dark

and vast and looming, almost physical, wrapped around her body. She could see the murderous shine in his eyes as he took in her appearance. And inexplicably, she felt relief as they pushed her towards him, and Fedyor grabbed her under her arm and kept her steady.

It was a lie. She was headed from one enemy to another. There was no safety in this for her, but what choice did she have? What was left to do? She could barely stand. The soldiers stopped and she stopped too. They untied her hands as Aleksander approached, tall and all encompassing like a thunderstorm. She remembered his tent, the first time she met him, how he stepped close and the entire world dimmed at his command. The only thing she could see was him, his eyes searching, his expression unreadable. It was as if he was made of stone, three faint scars spread across his face. He didn't say anything as he looked at her and she felt herself shrink. A priest appeared, and several people surrounded them. Fedyor was at her side and she recognized Ivan standing behind Aleksander, his face stony and alert.

The priest spoke, the barest and shortest ritual of all, inadequate for enemies, necessary for a war front. Her hands were tied again, with his - her left, a crescent moon scar next to a star shaped stab on his palm. Both scars her doing and around them a ribbon of red silk. *A red thread.*

The priest blessed them and the peace they brought to their countries.

And that was it. It was done.

*

"Take her to my tent," were the first words that she had heard him say to Ivan and Fedyor. If she could choose she would have picked Fedyor to accompany her because he at least gave her an illusion of kindness.

"Yes, moi soverennyi," Fedyor replied. She didn't want to go to his tent, but that wasn't her choice to make any more, wasn't it? She was a captive again, without any hope of escaping this time. Alina forced her legs to move, wanting to ask about Mal, wanting to make certain that her sacrifice was not for nothing. She could see the Grisha and the soldiers, all eyes trained on her, and felt that they had to think her a traitor, an enemy finally recaptured. Everything she learned, all the power she harnessed, all the decisions she made, all the effort put in, everything brought her here, to the point of no return and no running away from. The sky clouded over, the world faded from her eyes. She heard Fedyor shout for help as she collapsed and then a pair of hands caught her - not Fedyor, not Ivan. She knew who it was, as certain as the darkness that swallowed her and she could hear Aleksander shout for a healer as he lifted her as if she was *nothing*.

*

"There was only so much I could do. I am not a trained healer, and who knows how long... they have kept her like that."

Alina could hear Fedyor's voice, but she couldn't open her eyes. She was lying down, and everything around her was soft and warm. Her right arm did not ache any more, her legs felt fine, but she was too weak to even move her head.

"She needs regular, light meals. Small portions. And regular healing sessions. She needs to rest," another voice was saying, someone close by. A healer? "She is malnourished, she had been kept hungry, her arms were tied, she was kept from calling on her powers."

Alina felt something shift beside her.

"Will she recover?"

It was Aleksander. He was right there.

"With time and proper care, yes," the healer said. "I have done all I could for now. I would let her rest."

The healer left.

"Fedor?"

"Yes, moi soverennyi?"

"Prepare everything to sign the first round of treaty documents tomorrow," Aleksander said, his voice sounding heavy and tired. "Hopefully, a part of this madness will end," he added. "I want to end it as soon as possible, and better not to bring up the horrible state of Miss - of Lady Kirigan."

"Yes, moi soverennyi."

There was something heavy in his voice, heavier than darkness and his shadows. Alina blinked, her eyelids felt as if made of lead. There was Aleksander, sitting next to her, his hand covering hers. And she felt the same pull from their first meeting in his tent, the pull that made her dizzy and breathless in his war room when she told him he wasn't alone and his eyes were wet with grief. The touch made her feel at peace, heavy and sleepy, luring her into a calm that wasn't, couldn't be real, but she had no strength to fight it.

She fell asleep, her hand secured in his.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Alina gets to talk to Aleksander.

When she woke up the next morning, Alina wasn't sure where she was at first.

There was light. Not too much of it, but she wasn't trapped in pitch blackness any more. She wasn't tied, she wasn't in pain. She could hear the sounds coming from somewhere close by, footsteps, people talking, horse hooves on the ground.

She slowly blinked, pried her eyelids open. She had slept but she was tired still. Her surroundings felt familiar - she was in a simple bed, and near her a table with a bowl of fruits, a chair placed next to the bed... black drapes.... *the General's tent* .

She remembered then. She remembered her cell, the Captain, the shackles, the red ribbon. Aleksander.

No.

No, it wasn't real, *couldn't* be real. She had to go, get away, but she found out immediately that she couldn't even lift herself into a seating position - which was when someone chose to enter the tent.

"Lady Kirigan?" It was Fedyor. She very nearly recoiled at the title he used. "Oh, no, no, please don't try to do that by yourself. If you want to sit I will help you," he said. He had a tray of food with him, which he set at the table nearby and stepped close to her bed. At which point she realized it had to be Aleksander's bed. He put her in his bed? Did he...? But it was a simple field bed, with a few pillows extra, but it could only hold one person. Fedyor knelt next to her and soon he expertly helped her to a half seated position, propped her on those pillows and repositioned the chair that stood close to the bed. Then he took the food tray and sat down. "How are you feeling?"

Alina looked at him. He was smiling, the usual, easy and open smile that was absent from him yesterday. Would he treat her like this if he privately thought her an enemy? What did Aleksander order him?

"A little bit better," she said, wondering if that tiny bit of honesty could be used against her. Well, it wasn't like they had no healers who could tell, and other ways to pry any shred of control from her hands.

Fedyor's smile widened, as if in relief at her words. "I am so very glad to hear that." He had a plate with dried meat and cheese, slices of an apple and a piece of bread- and Alina's eyes stuck to the food a bit too long. "Oh, are you hungry? I apologize. Here you go," he placed the tray with food gently on her lap. "Sonya, our senior healer, recommended that you take every meal slowly. Until your body can get used to regular meals."

Alina watched him, incredulous.

"Lady Kirigan... did I say something wrong?"

Alina blinked. Everything was wrong.

"Oh no, I am just... it's..."

"I apologize," he hurried to say, pleading with her with a smile. "I should let you enjoy your meal and rest, instead of bothering you. Entire month of captivity would have been horrible on anyone."

Entire month?

"Was it that long?" Alina asked before she could stop herself. Sympathy transformed Fedyor's cheerful expression.

"That was what our intelligence found out, and as soon as we did find out, the General engaged in negotiation."

Alina paused at that. So he took great effort to get her back.

"Please," Fedyor said, nodding towards the tray on her lap. "I apologize if I bothered you."

With that he was gone, leaving Alina with a realization that she missed opportunities for ordinary conversation more than she could tell. And aside from that, she realized she was hungry, and that she missed food, decent food for a lot longer.

Okay. Eat slowly. She knew of this from her own military training. She ate the meat and the cheese, making herself take tiny pieces, combining it with bread. Then she ate the apple slices, enjoying their freshness, their taste, as if they were the most delicious thing on earth. After finishing what Fedyor brought her she realized she was thirsty.

And that there was a pitcher of water on the table.

Fedyor said she shouldn't be getting up by herself, but there wasn't anyone here and she wasn't going to call for help. And just when she was trying to grab the chair Fedyor used and pull herself up, someone else entered the tent.

"You shouldn't be doing that."

Startled at his voice, Alina dropped back into bed (his bed). He was there, in front of her, before she could push herself off to the other end of the cot. "You'll hurt yourself," he said, not an ounce of irony in his voice.

"Like you would care."

Her mouth was quicker than her mind. Aleksander looked... disheveled, harried, unusually unfocused, with his dark hair in disarray and shadows under his eyes. He didn't answer her barb, he just took a breath and his eyes fell to the pitcher of water on the table. Without much prompting he found a glass, filled it with water and offered it to her.

Alina stared at him, everything in her wanting to reject that glass, but her throat was dry, and tight (not just from the thirst).

"Take it. Please," he said, his voice almost soft.

So she did. It felt like another defeat, small in comparison to the desperate agreement she made yesterday. Aleksander sat on that chair and she realized he was sitting in it when she was briefly awake yesterday. That he put his hand on hers. The water felt good, it felt necessary, but her body and her mind were still exhausted and heavy.

"What do you want?" she asked, reminding herself of a cat in a corner, terrified of the dogs surrounding her. She could bare her fangs all she wanted. It was of no use.

Aleksander took a long look at her before he said or did anything. It was a strange look, probing, searching, without the usual sharp edge that he had about him. More than anything he seemed tired and unwilling to engage in an argument. Not that Alina had any true strength to do so either. Her mind was terrified of what would happen. Her body, uncooperative and with a will of its own, was content to be fed and tired and put in this bed.

Aleksander reached inside his kefta and pulled out something made of black fabric. Something made of delicate knots, then held it out to her. Only then Alina noticed - an armband around his own wrist. The wedding armband. And the one he was giving her, to match his. When she didn't take it, he took the empty tray from her lap and replaced it with the woven bracelet.

"You might not enjoy it but it is your reality," he said and Alina imagined she heard a victorious undertone in his words.

"Reality? Even the name you put on me is not real," she replied, refusing to touch his offering sitting on the nice, clean cover on the bed.

"That name is what protects you," he said, his words precise and practical, with just a slight cut to them. "That name protects all of us -"

"Us??"

"You are a Grisha. We-," he said and she wanted to yell at him. She *knew* that. She felt as if it was something he forced upon her, even though realistically she knew it wasn't his fault. But she didn't want to be a Grisha by his standards and for his purpose.

"And I wish I wasn't," she interrupted him. That made his expression harden and his nostrils flare, but just for a fraction of a moment. Underneath the anger he remained tired, tired and exhausted, with an undercurrent of something that she couldn't quite name.

"But we cannot choose, can we? None of the Grisha can, none of the Grisha who were killed for being what they are, chose any of it," he said, his words quick, charged, *painful*.

Alina didn't want his pain. She didn't want his speeches, she didn't want him to convince her or explain. He rose from the chair and she hoped he would just leave - she couldn't go anywhere at all, and even if she could, she would bet that he left half a dozen guards around his tent.

But he didn't leave.

"Do you know that Marie died? That she was killed?"

"<i>What</i>?"

"Did Baghra forget to tell you about that?"

His voice was calm, but his eyes were not. Alina felt her chest tighten.

"You're lying," she said, even as she felt foolish.

"I wish. She died because an assassin thought *she was you*. At the Winter fete."

He was trying to make her feel guilty. To give up her stance, her beliefs, everything she knew, forget what he did to her -

But even as she thought that her eyes were filling up with tears. And at the same time, so did his. "Baghra failed to mention that, didn't she? Or perhaps the fact that our own general sent an assassin to kill you? Or that he attempted a civil war?"

Alina wanted to tell him again that he was lying. That he was trying to manipulate her and convince her that whatever he was doing was justified. Except she felt that she had no footing in this - not the superior knowledge of military and politics that he possessed - and the news of Marie being killed felt like a knife in her chest.

Unexpectedly, he sat back in the chair next to her and ran a hand across his face. She saw the scar on the back of his hand, she could see faint lines across his cheek and his chin, disappearing in his beard.

"I did not come here to upset you," he said. Alina didn't know what to say to that. "The Tsar thinks you were kidnapped. That is the official stance on ... you leaving."

"How convenient," she said. "Did you expect me to come back?"

"I learned, the hard way, that I always had to think ten steps ahead. That name which you call is not real... it is what stands between you and death. In West Ravkan prison or by the hand of an assassin because even I cannot stop the rumors. What makes your position better is the fact that you made the peace treaty possible."

Alina snorted. "My captivity in exchange for being regarded as a hero," she said.

"Your safety, in exchange for people not dying."

"You *killed a city full of people*," she bit back. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Have you ever seen a war, Alina?" he asked softly, in a dejected tone she had never heard from him. "Can you imagine how many people, how many cities would have died if this continued? How many already did?"

"You don't have an excuse for what you did," she said.

"No. I did what I did. But I wish I was *never* put in a position to do it."

"So it's now *my* fault?" she felt herself shake. As tired as she was, she felt furious, and he could see that. So much about not wanting to upset her.

"I did not say that. I only wish... you weren't so quick to pass judgment on me, without even giving me a chance to explain -"

"I don't want an explanation," she said, her lower lip trembling, ignoring his defeated tone, and how her mind wanted to know why he was holding himself like this - so uncharacteristic. So *fragile*. She felt trapped, played, abandoned and completely alone.

"Fine. Then I will not give you one. Until you ask me to."

As always, he assumed she would do as he wanted. And she was determined, this ridiculous marriage or not, not to let him have his way.

Without any further words he rose from the chair he was sitting on and he left her to her thoughts and sorrows.

*

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Alina recovers, things are far from ideal and Fedyor is the sweet sunshine.

The healer roused her and insisted that she had to sit up, and then, with help and support, stand up. Sonya Petrovna seemed like a middle aged woman with firm grip and attention to detail and she did not let Alina fall.

“The body remembers its strength best when it's forced to remember,” Sonya held Alina’s forearms. “Do not worry. I will support you.”

And she did. Alina took a step, then another, and another, until they walked around the tent.

Two men in uniforms brought in a wooden tub. It was plain and the water wasn’t as warm as it used to be in Little Palace, but Alina had help, and a soap. How long was it, since her last bath? She couldn’t even remember. And then there were new clothes that actually fit her. It was Aleksander’s doing, it had to be, because this wasn’t a healer’s job, no matter how strategically important she was. Was he attempting to endear her to him with kindness? It wouldn’t work, she knew who he was.

Alina’s muscles were protesting, but it felt better than being condemned to the narrow field bed, no matter how comfortable it was. The toll of the captivity showed - walking felt like something she had to relearn, her muscles needing to remember how to support her. “Your strength will return, with time,” Sonya said, bringing Alina back to the cot and helping her sit down. “Now let me look at you.”

The healer placed a hand on top of her head, her shoulder, middle of her chest. Alina could feel the flow of power, the tingling along her spine, her muscles relaxing. She took a deep breath and felt a bit less tired, a bit more energetic. “That’s enough for now,” Sonya said. “You will need regular meals, plenty of rest and moderate physical activity. Light walks at first. And then -” she paused and her eyes seemed to drift to something beside Alina. She glanced to her side and realized that Aleksander’s wedding bracelet still lay on her mattress.

“I will see you in a couple of hours, Lady Kirigan,” Sonya said, as pleasant as she had been the entire time, yet Alina was sharply aware of the soft and delicate armband sitting on the bed next to her. She knew that a married woman was supposed to wear it, and for all the defiance she harbored in her chest, something was telling her that ignoring his wedding bracelet was not a wise choice. Once alone in his tent, while sitting on his bed, she took the bracelet in her hand and examined it.

It only seemed delicate. She gently tried to stretch the fabric. It allowed some stretch, but it was strong. Alina wondered who made it, knowing that spouses were supposed to bind them; but she doubted that it was Aleksander’s doing. Why would he bother? He wanted to have her as a possession, and he probably ordered someone to make both bracelets. He didn’t have to wear his but he did - all for the sake of the appearance, she was certain. It wasn’t real, and it wasn’t *his*.

Thinking of that, it somehow felt easier to slip it on her wrist. There. A visible sign that she was his possession now. Her mind rebelled in anger, but her heart felt tired and heavy.

*

She managed to fall asleep. It seemed that the light walk around the tent and a bath took all her energy, despite the strengthening power that Sonya passed to her. Next time Alina woke up, someone was softly calling for Lady Kirigan.

Alina opened her eyes and there was Fedyor, sitting on the chair, with another tray of food. Whatever he had brought smelled good enough to make her stomach growl, and he gave her a delighted smile. Just as the first time around he placed the tray on the table and offered to help her sit up.

“I would like to sit at the table,” she said. She was clean now, and Sonya said that her strength would return if she nudged her body to return it. Getting up was easier, but she was still exhausted and unstable on her own two feet. Fedyor’s arm was steady and sure as he pulled her up. Once seated at the table she felt confident that she could sit through her meal. The food waiting for her looked delicious - soft bread, warm broth with pieces of potatoes and meat, and again several apple slices, fresh and beautiful.

“Please, enjoy your meal, Lady Kirigan,” Fedoyr offered.

Alina took the spoon, watching him politely excuse himself to leave, and resigned herself to her isolation. But the moment he started getting up, she spoke. “Do you have to go?”

“No, of course not. But I thought I should let you eat in peace, and return for the tray later.”

“Well, I...” Alina wanted to ask him to stay, but she struggled to form the words. This was just an obligation loaded onto him, wasn’t it? He wasn’t here to entertain the traitor of her own kind.

“Would you like some company?” Fedyor offered. He seemed as kind as always, his demeanor gentle and his candor intact. Alina nodded, at which he sat back.

"Have you been delegated a task to be my maid, then?"

Fedyor laughed a little, without any malice. "Oh no. I volunteered."

Alina put her spoon down. He must have noticed the cold shiver that went over her. Did he realize she didn't expect anyone to act friendly, to be kind? Did he feel pity? "You seem surprised, Lady Kirigan."

"I.. am," she said very quietly. She wanted to know why. She didn't want to know it. She wondered if believing false kindness was worse than realizing that this world held no kindness for her at all.

"Well, I am glad that you're back with us."

"...Why?" she asked because she couldn't stop herself. because she couldn't believe that anyone here would willingly help her, outside of whatever Aleksander ordered them to.

"Because you are safe here. What happened to you... just proves that. I am glad that you're here, safe. And I'm sorry you had to go through such horrible things."

He sounded sincere. Alina searched his face but couldn't find any sign of deceit between the softness of his look and the stretch of his lips. She wished she could believe him at least a little bit.

"What is going on outside?" she asked, not able to carry on the previous conversation any more.

"At the camp? Or about the treaty?" Fedyor asked.

"Both, I guess," she said, realizing that she was interested about the treaty now when he mentioned it.

"We're starting to pack up," Fedyor began. "A small unit, which will accompany you and the General to the Little Palace. The camp is staying here. Prisoners on both sides are going to be exchanged, no exception. All military activity has been stopped and we're calling our scouts back. The ceasefire is in effect. At some later point, I expect, the camp will be moved east. We expect... an influx of refugees. As does West Ravka. A lot of people will need help. We will need a resettlement base for so many who will want to move away from new borders."

She found herself listening, all the information he was able to give her. Or rather, everything he was allowed to impart. He knew how to keep a listener interested. If she wasn't able to follow all the detail he was presenting, she could at least listen to a voice that felt friendly enough. Soon she was finished with her meal, and despite it being modest in size - just as the healer recommended - she felt full.

"Should I help you back to bed?"

Alina felt tired. Without any protest she let Fedyor pull her up and then held onto his hand as she lowered herself back onto the bed. His next comment took her by surprise.

"Oh, that's beautiful. I wasn't sure the General knew how to make them," Fedyor said. Alina realized that he was looking at her bracelet that lay against her skin, where the fabric of the dress was pulled lower.

"The General made them?" she asked.

"Well, of course he did," Fedyor smiled, and added as if it was the most natural, truest thing in the world, "Who else would do it?"

*

Alina fell asleep, woke, the healer came to check on her and went away. Alina wasn't sure what time of the day it was, guessing only by the movement and activity she could hear outside the general's tent.

She lay on the bed, trying not to think how it was Aleksander's or how she could feel his scent when she moved her head against the pillows.

She still knew his scent. It still caused a tug inside her chest, like a reflex she wasn't able to unlearn. It was horribly, completely unfair.

She had tried to forget him, back in all those months when she and Mal were hiding. The Darkling is now gone, Mal would say. She let him hold her hand as he painted a quiet future - a house and a farm, and no more war. No more Grisha, no more madness. They just had to find someplace safe. At night, as Alina lay on the ground, sometimes covered with anything they had, sometimes cold to the bone, she tried not to think of the dark eyes and how her power responded to his, her light to his darkness. It would go away, the memory and the light, just like a muscle that shrunk after being bound and unused.

Not long after, her arms were literally bound. She couldn't reach her power no matter how she tugged at it. And the darkness? So thick around her that she was unable to imagine the dark eyes any more. She couldn't imagine anything - not then, in that cell, and not now, safely wrapped in blankets, her face against Aleksander's pillow, and his wedding band around her wrist.

(She didn't dare imagine.)

*

The kefta was completely black, and if she had to guess it used to be his and then remade for her to wear. She was sure Fabrikators had better job to do.

“Why?” she asked and Sonya looked at Fedyor who patiently waited in the middle of the tent - room.

“The final treaty signing,” Fedyor explained. Of course. She had to present a united front with her husband. She had to be there to prove that his side would honor their part of the deal.

She didn’t want to, and she was about to protest but someone else unexpectedly walked into the tent.

“Why? You dare ask why after everything?” Ivan was not someone who would spare her even in the slightest and she could see the anger on him. “You betrayed him, you betrayed *all of us*, and even after that, the general put everything he had into freeing you. He even *married* you -”

“Ivan!” Fedyor was saying but the other heartrender’s face was as red as his kefta. Alina felt angry and at the same time acutely aware of her position, of everything that was at stake; the cease fire, the prisoners, the people who would soon need home. mal, locked in one of those cells.

“No,” Ivan said, daggers in his eyes. He took the kefta from Fedyor and gave Alina a look full of contempt. “He spent the entire night at your side. He spent countless more to get you out. You can wear the damn kefta,” and with that he threw the garment at Alina, to catch it.

She pulled it on. Ivan left and the healer rushed after him, and Fedyor was the one left with her, trying to help her into the thick fabric. It felt warm around her body, a deceptive safety.

“I am so sorry,” he said, daring a brief squeeze of Alina’s shoulder. She felt swallowed by the black.

“Well at least he’s honest.”

Fedyor’s stare was firm and serious. “And I am honest as well.”

“Then how come you don’t hate me?” her heart sped up and her eyes burned.

“You’re not hated,” Fedyor was saying slowly, as if he was trying to impart his calm on her. “Hatred and anger are not the same thing. And I certainly don’t hate you. Nor am I angry. I am more... sad.”

First time when she wore black, Aleksander looked at her like she was a miracle. It had been a life, of course, an act, a carefully devised plan just like the flowers tied with a black ribbon. The way he looked at her when she stepped out of the tent with Fedyor was something she couldn’t read - didn’t dare to - but his dark eyes were everything but calm. Fedyor brought her to him, her black kefta matching his, her dark hair now clean.

“Thank you, Fedyor,” he said, offering his arm to Alina. Fedor bowed slightly - in calm and respect, not blinded obedience.

“Moy soverennyi. Moya soverenniya.”

Alina reached for Aleksander’s hand realizing that part of her was fighting a futile fight. That she had resigned herself to this, accepted this, chose this. It was a terrible choice, but the alternative was worse - and so she made herself hold onto his arm.

She didn’t touch his skin, but despite that she could feel his power beneath her fingertips, surging to meet hers like a flood of strength. Unable to stop herself she looked up at Aleksander, realizing how painfully familiar every angle of his face was.

“Can you walk?” Aleksander asked, quiet enough and only for her to hear. Alina nodded. She could hold herself upright for now. Aleksander led and she followed, towards the center of that same field where they were wed two days ago. In the middle of it, West Ravkan officers waited beside a table covered with treaty papers. Before them stood the West Ravkan garrison, Alina’s first sight of the place that held her captive for over a month. Alina’s breath hitched as she was suddenly flooded by the memory of stench, the cold, the pain of her bound hands.

He felt it - he had to, because her feet faltered for a second. Before she could speak and before Fedyor could react, Aleksander covered her hand with his palm. His power came in another wave, along with the warmth of his hand, and with it all assurance, and connection, which felt as visceral as a scream. Alina took a breath. It was enough. She didn’t understand it, or how he could do so much with a single touch of his hand. “You’re safe,” he said a moment they neared her former captors, now allies. “They will not touch you any more.”

And the worst thing was, she believed him.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“You created them?” she said, realizing what probably happened - he created more monsters, he filled the world with more atrocities.

“I was trying to defend myself,” he said. It sounded so trivial, so unlike anything she expected, and she almost told herself not to believe them - except she felt, overwhelmingly, that he was truthful.

Chapter Notes

I didn't read the books, but I am familiar with most of the concepts from SaB universe - and at this point I'm starting to make the rules how stuff works, instead of trying to fit it into the book canon. Thank you 221bb, Orlissa and Hithelleth for letting me talk these ideas endlessly over and over! And thank you everyone who is following and reading this story. <3

There was darkness. It surrounded her, erupting from her body and tearing her apart, and it swallowed her up whole.

Alina was startled awake by the carriage stopping. Her head lolled and she had to hold the edge of her bench. The darkness dissolved into the interior of the carriage and the sight of Fedyor's worried expression. She took a deep breath and rubbed her face, realizing that she was dreaming - and that the dream wasn't too far from reality. When she looked out of the window, she realized why they had stopped.

The Fold.

“Ah. We're ... we have arrived at the Fold crossing,” Fedyor seemed just slightly nervous, but still too calm in Alina's opinion. She looked at him and then down at her hands. She had no strength to cast a tiny sphere, let alone summon the light enough for them to safely pass. “The skiff should be awaiting us”.

After the final treaty documents were signed, Aleksander insisted on leaving. Alina watched him sign the papers, realizing only then what had happened. Nobody would be held in a dungeon like she was any more. People would be freed, and instigators of the coup would be held accountable. People would be given a chance to resettle, to build new homes. Aleksander's face was impassive, unreadable, but Fedyor's eyes offered assurance. On the other side her former captors tried very hard to avoid looking at her, and for a very small moment Alina was glad that Aleksander was *right there*.

A carriage awaited, and the General of the Second Army, the Black heretic; *her husband* accompanied her to it. He helped her climb in and lingered for a moment longer, the expression on his face unreadable, but, it seemed, not unkind.

Fedyor sat on the opposite bench through the entire ride. At first she attempted small talk, until she realized she really didn't have to speak - she was tired and Fedyor didn't mind when she fell quiet, her eyes lost in the distance. About forty men rode along with them, ensuring that any enemy would think twice before attempting to ambush the General's caravan. At times Alina caught the glimpse of Aleksander, black figure on a black horse, riding close by. He wouldn't let anyone endanger them - but he wouldn't let her ever be free again either. At least she assured peace, didn't she? She assured peace, not in the way he was promising her not too long ago. Her powers were dimmed, muted, ironically coming back to life only when she touched him. She traded herself for other's lives, for Mal's life, and whatever happened, she told herself, it wasn't in vain. Tired and resigned she let herself drift in and out of sleep. How ironic was it then, that she dreamed of the Fold swallowing her alive the moment they arrived there?

Aleksander opened the door and his arm awaited her, the connection between them brought back to life the moment she took it. He led her towards the skiff and her chest tightened at the sight of the endless mass of darkness stretching before them.

“You're upset,” he remarked, so calm and detached. He wasn't wrong, but she wasn't merely upset. She was about to jump out of her skin as the memory of the last time crossing the Fold played inside her mind.

“I'm not sure how you expect us to cross it this time? Or do you have another amplifier to stick into my neck?”

There was a brief flash of something on his face. She was holding onto him and she sensed it. *Hurt*. He quickly walled up and lifted his chin just slightly before answering.

“There is no need for that,” he said. It was definitive, an answer that didn't offer more explanation as she followed him onto the skiff. Anxiety rose within her and inside of him was something dark and dreadful, something he was trying to cover. It made her frightened.

The deck of the skiff filled with people. Alina still held onto Aleksander's arm, watching the preparations, the blue light ignited, the squaller climbing up on the mast, calling forth the wind with his hands. So many people were heading towards a certain doom. Fedyor and Ivan stood close by, their eyes trained towards the darkness. She felt her throat tighten and her chest constrict with panic with each inch they crossed, until the skiff sank into dark wastness.

Minutes passed in silence. And then, suddenly, she could hear the volcra. She could feel them, hurling towards the fragile vessel that held them all, and she forgot herself enough to tighten her hold around Aleksander's arm - and just before the creature struck them something surged from the darkness surrounding them. Something tall, huge, a creature seemingly made of shadow - and struck down the screaming beast.

Alina was barely aware of the approving whispers around her, of Ivan nodding, and Fedyor catching her eyes and trying his best to give her wordless assurance.

"What was that?" she asked. The only person who could answer that stood next to her, his arm still in her hold.

"Its help," Aleksander answered, his eyes glued to the darkness as if he couldn't wouldn't allow himself to even blink.

"You can do better than that," she said, her voice hard even though inside she was shaking. For the second time his hand covered hers - soft and warm palm on top of her knuckles, and with it the momentary feeling of safety she didn't want to trust. Her mind rebelled even though her chest seemed to loosen and the panic subsided. She wanted to scream at herself, at him, at the darkness around them, but somehow, his touch seemed to take it all away.

"When you and your friends left me for the dead, they helped me survive."

"They?"

"The shadow soldiers. The *nichevo* 'ya," he paused.

Nichevo'ya. Nothing-beings. Alina stared at him.

"You *created* them?" she said, realizing what probably happened - he created more monsters, he filled the world with more atrocities. The darkness rippled around them like water, the roar of blind beasts filling the air.

"I was trying to defend myself," he said. It sounded so trivial, so unlike anything she expected, and she almost told herself not to believe them - except she felt, overwhelmingly, that he was truthful. "It's not like I planned to create them. Once I had them, I put them into use."

She wanted to say more, but something stopped her - the fact that he didn't need her any more to cross the Fold or even manage it, the fact that merzost chipped away another piece of him - and that he didn't mind it happening? Or perhaps the fact that he was changed, in an unknown amount, and that she couldn't tell how much of Aleksander was permanently lost - and if any of him was left behind? She felt anger rise within her, but all she could do was helplessly stand there.

Instead of anger, Alina swallowed tears.

"I'm surprised you even agreed to a treaty. Why not tear that garrison apart? Order your shadow soldiers to ... *take* their lands and extinguish civil war? Why trouble yourself -"

"Because one should never play all the cards for an enemy to see," he said, finally looking at her and stopping her tirade. "Because I wanted a treaty. Because -" he stopped, their gazes locked, her judgement meeting his angry, vulnerable gaze. "I knew they held you."

"And you wouldn't let me slip away?"

"I *didn't want you hurt*," he said. He pried his gaze away, and yet he still held her hand securely in his.

*

I didn't want you hurt, he said.

In that particular moment, her feet on the wooden deck of the skiff, she believed it. Those words silenced her, until they passed through the Unsea.

She believed it because it *felt* true, with their hands connected and their powers locked. But now, in the quiet of the carriage, alone with her thoughts and doubts she was turning those words over and over in her head.

I didn't want you hurt. Yet you hurt me, she thought. She thought about the stag's collar, the pain of it piercing her skin, the agony of watching Aleksander turn away from her. If you didn't want me hurt, then why did you hurt me? If I was special, if I was what you waited for, for so long? *I didn't want you hurt*, how was that not a lie? She spent the remainder of the journey silent on her bench, pretending to sleep or falling into an oblivion without dreams, with a silent Fedyor sitting opposite her.

*

Two days later they arrived at the Little Palace.

It was late, and dark enough to barely make out the outlines of the palace, the big gate, the guards in their dark uniforms. The sound of horse hooves on cobblestones still familiar, just like every single sight that surrounded her.

The door of the carriage opened and certainly, Aleksander was there, offering her his arm again. Alina took it, the resignation regarding her position now complete. She stepped out and swayed a bit. The journey was long and she couldn't rest properly, and it was still just a couple of

days since she was tied to a wall and fed once a day. He grabbed her both arms. She could sense his panic as Fedyor called for a Healer.

"I just need to rest," Alina said, realizing that these were the people helping her - her husband - her captor, and everyone who was loyal to him.

"Alina?"

The palace yard was empty, save for the guards. It was the voice that made her look up, the familiar voice -

"Genya?"

Alina looked up and Genya was there. Genya in her ivory kefta, with her flaming hair loose and her eyes huge with disbelief and sadness and shock.

And only then Alina wondered how she even looked.

"Oh, *Saints*, Alina," Genya came close and paused only when she realized that Aleksander was still holding her up. "I... I can help, moy soverenyi," she added, and to Alina's relief, Aleksander just nodded. Between two of them, and followed by Fedyor and Sonya, Alina walked into Little Palace months and months after leaving it.

Everything was... the same. With the familiarity came the relief, almost as if she had returned home - only this time she knew this was a prison. Alina wasn't certain if it was because she was tired, because she couldn't really take any more; but instead of recoiling, instead of feeling trapped, she was ready to let go. If only for a bit. The hallways were familiar, the lamps were all in the same spot, the colors of the walls still warm gold, illuminated by candle light. The door to the Vezda suite creaked the same way, and her room - *her room* - still smelled exactly the same.

Aleksander stopped at the threshold of her chambers, his gaze lingering on Alina before turning to Genya.

"I will leave the two of you here," he said. "Miss Safin, please help Lady Kirigan settle."

"Yes, moy soverenyi," Genya said. With one more nod at Genya and another lingering gaze at Alina he closed the door and was gone.

Alina crumbled on herself. All of her strength was sapped and she just wanted to fall. Genya caught her and helped her to the bed. Alina thought that she should probably hate Genya, that she should be angry, that she should send her away, because Genya was the person who kept the letters, wasn't she? But when Genya knelt in front of her, her eyes filled with unshed tears, all Alina could do was start to cry. And when Genya hugged her all Alina was able to do was cry harder - for herself, for all the time she was bound and locked, for her powers that were next to gone. For the fact that she wasn't, and would never be free. And she could feel Genya cry as well.

"I was afraid we'd lose you," she was saying. "I was afraid they'd ... -" Whatever it was, Genya stopped herself before she said it. "They left a month ago. The General, Ivan, Fedyor, the company -"

"A month ago?"

Genya nodded. "A month ago. No word from them. It was -" Genya shook her head, lightly touching Alina's hair, inspecting her face and wiping away the tears. Both hers and Alina's. "But... it's over now. It's over. You will be better," she said with some kind of painful resolve that Alina did not understand, but in that moment it felt good and true. And then she said something similar to what Fedyor kept saying. "Thank Saints, Alina. You're safe now."

*

She dreamed of darkness again. It started at her fingertips with the feeling of her skin being ripped open, it spilled from her palms and she screamed, her chest burning. It erupted from all of her and she felt as if torn into pieces, into thousand broken pieces that would never find their place again. It exploded from out of her, in pain and agony until there was nothing else to see, or hear or feel -

And that's when she sat upright, her heart pounding in her chest, her shift stuck to her clammy skin.

Alina sat up, tangled in the sheets, trying to catch her breath when something else nearly made her jump out of her skin.

Aleksander stood there, in his black robe, his face drawn and tired. Alina nearly screamed and he looked up, seemingly startled and confused.

"What - what are you doing here?" she asked. He stared for awhile longer, as if there was something he couldn't comprehend.

"What do you mean *here*?" he asked her back.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“It’s not as bleak as you might be imagining,” Geyna continued, her eyes now focused on Alina’s hair, her movements familiar and soothing. “You have a name, a position. With it comes certain power. Significant power.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter might be smaller than others, but I feel it's just right - and it's a turning point after which Alina's life starts to change, so including anything past this point felt like it didn't really belong here.

For everyone who asked last time what happened at the end of chapter 4 - I hope this chapter provides an answer.

To his credit, he knocked, but it was short and nervous and urgent. He didn’t wait to be invited, he just opened the door, a lamp in his hand. Alina sat up in her bed, pulled the covers up to her breasts and tried to calm her heart pounding in her chest.

“What- what are you doing here?”

He paused at the foot of her bed, his black kefta sitting weirdly on his shoulders, atop his thin robe. He looked frantic, his eyes searching for something, and after a couple of moments he seemed to let out a breath.

“Are you alright?” She just stared at him, confused. “Did you get out of your room by yourself?”

“What are you doing, Aleksander? You were here a moment ago -”

“No I wasn’t. I was in the War Room and you just appeared there -”

“What are you talking about? I was asleep and you were *right there*,” Alina pointed to a corner near the window to her right. She steeled herself as the tension in her rose steadily. “I... get it, if you want to come in here and take what’s yours, but there’s no need to pretend -”

“What??” he stared at her, and the shock on his face was hard to describe. He paled, disbelief taking over his features. “You think ...I would --?”

The way he said it gave her pause and she had to look at him even though she didn’t want to. He was aware of what she was saying. He took a step back, looking shocked and *hurt*, and that somehow didn’t please her at all, despite everything she thought of him. She looked down at her hands. “You thought I was in the War Room?” she asked, her voice small

“And you thought I was here,” he said, his voice very heavy.

“I saw you,” she said. “One moment. You said.... *What do you mean here?* When I asked what were you doing here. I heard that,” she said, trying to calm down.

“I did say that,” he offered. “But I wasn’t here. I thought you walked in - and then left. And -” he paused, seemingly pulling up the walls around him. “I wanted to see if you got back safely. But you’re saying you didn’t leave your room.”

“No,” she said, more confused than scared. “So what happened then? I wasn’t at two places at once,” she said, watching him frown. For a moment they were simply discussing a situation that needed an explanation and she almost felt like before. Like when they just talked. “And you’re claiming you weren’t either,” she added. He shook his head, all desire to argue seemingly lost to him.

“What were you doing? before you saw me?”

“I was asleep. Why does it matter?”

“It matters,” he said, and she had a feeling that he wasn’t telling her something.

“Aleksander,” she demanded, saying his name for the first time in long months. “Explain.”

“It’s only a theory which needs to be explored. Or confirmed. It’s called tether. A connection of power, a link which allows ... to be together upon a shared thought. Shared thoughts of one another.”

“What are you saying?” She pushed herself up to sit more comfortably on the bed. “That I have to think of you and -”

He raised his chin, his hands clasped behind his back. “Yes.”

She had a dream about the darkness. About the darkness that surged from her fingertips, that ripped her body open while she was in pain - too much pain for a mere dream. She had a dream through someone else’s eyes. Someone’s *memory*. “I slept. I had a dream. A bad dream,” he looked

at her intently.

“About what?” He seemed to hold his breath.

Alina stared at him, his gaze intent and heavy on her.

“Darkness,” she said, her breath hitching as he thickly swallowed. “The Fold.”

He looked down.

Alina didn’t trust him, and all of her hurt and disappointment were still there and present. But at that moment he looked vulnerable, the way he did a long time ago when she came to the War Room and offered him her light. Promised him that he wasn’t alone. She could still feel the warmth of that moment within her. A thought appeared, a feeling, knowledge - how alone he had been, in how much pain and desperation when what she dreamed about had happened. She knew now what she was dreaming about.

He didn’t offer any explanation, he didn’t say anything, he just stood there. She realized that he was exposed, that she could lash out, sink her teeth into his pain and convince him not to seek her out. To just give her space, even if he took away everything else.

But she didn’t do that.

“I’m sorry,” he said. She wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for. “Rest,” he added, softly, and all that pain and hurt followed him as he went away, just as his shadows did.

*

For the next couple of days she didn’t see him at all. Genya came every morning, bringing tea, helping her dress, convincing her to wear something comfortable, yet pretty. She combed her hair, brought her books, told her news about the treaty. On most days she came to see Alina at least two more times.

Aleksander had sent notes, inviting her to have breakfast or tea with him. She refused to reply each and every time.

Several maids would bring her meals, everything in accordance with the healer’s instructions. Not a single maid made one improper remark, and everyone who dealt with her was calm and patient. Sometimes, there would be a single flower when the meal arrived, near her plates - a rose, or a lily or even an iris. Sometimes Alina would just look at the flower that sat there, solitary just like she was. Sometimes she’d take it, imagining the lingering warmth of the hand that picked it left over near the petals. Then she’d scold herself for doing so.

Fedyor would stop by as well, bringing her sweets, or a fashion magazine. He’d tell her about new horses at the stable, about idle gossip of the Little Palace, and he’d make sure to tell her each time how much better she looked. He’d offer his arm to her and convince her to take short walks - around her chambers, then slowly outside, and then up and down the stairs. It wasn’t his job, and she wondered if Aleksander ordered him to keep an eye on her - but even if it was; even if both him and Genya were ordered to watch over her for him, Alina still wanted their company. And she wondered, at times, if this was how he would wear her down. play into her loneliness, surround her with everything she needed, until she gave in.

*

“I assume this is not what you wanted for yourself,” Genya said, observing Alina’s expression in the vanity mirror as she slowly braided her hair.

At the first moment, Alina avoided looking back at her. However, pretending not to know what this was about felt pointless.

“Not really,” she spoke quietly. She and Genya held each other’s gazes in the mirror and Alina thought how there was no judgement in Genya’s eyes. Just some vague sadness, heaviness that Alina couldn’t quite decipher.

“It’s still not a reason to lock yourself away and give everyone an ample opportunity to gossip,” she said. “And not the harmless kind of gossip, Alina. You can stay here for a while more, but ultimately, nobody would believe you’re still recovering and that’s the reason why you never meet your husband or take over any sort of duties the lady of the palace should.”

Alina started to speak two times and then stopped. She didn’t consider it - any of it at all. She was spending days thinking about the inevitability of her situation, fighting nightmares about her imprisonment and focused on climbing the stairs without Fedyor’s help.

“It’s not as bleak as you might be imagining,” Geyna continued, her eyes now focused on Alina’s hair, her movements familiar and soothing. “You have a name, a position. With it comes certain power. Significant power.”

“What are you saying?”

“That you could make a difference. There’s a refugee settlement being built on the outskirts of Os Alta. You could make sure there was a school for children. Jobs for their parents. Protection for the Grisha who might be among them. Or you could ask to oversee implementation of the treaty. Follow up additional negotiations. You were a part of it, after all.”

As Genya spoke, Alina felt like weight was being lifted from her. Like a door had opened, just a crack, and she could, perhaps, carve a small niche for herself. A little bit of freedom.

“Or you could travel,” Genya added now that she had Alina’s attention.

“Travel?”

“Didn’t you dream about seeing the True Sea?” Genya half smiled.

Alina’s lips spread a little. “I did.”

“Well? If you had to marry for the sake of the peace treaty.... at least make it worth it?”

*

Next morning, when a note arrived, written in Aleksander’s neat writing, asking her to join him for afternoon tea, Alina sat at her desk and wrote him back.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Our minds...” he paused, seemingly choosing the words and how to express himself, and it seemed difficult. “They’re not built to sustain such memories. And these memories... they’re not built in a way that lets us forget.” He looked up and all she could see in his eyes was apology. Her mind didn’t want to believe it, but all other parts of her could not unsee it.

Chapter Notes

Well, that turned out softer than I thought it would. Huh. I hope you enjoy it! :)

Alina wanted to look simple, but put together - something that she didn’t truly feel, but nobody, including Aleksander, had to know that. Genya did her work masterfully, giving her face a healthier tone and arranging her hair into a strict but elegant style. It reminded her slightly of the way she looked for the Winter Fete, and she found it ironic, at best, but Genya said that this specific hairstyle was appropriate for a married woman - and that making an impression was important. Alina thought about those words, a voice inside telling her that she didn’t need to impress Aleksander. That she wasn’t due to conform to his rules or whims. But another part of her was telling her that how people of the Little Palace would view her would determine how they would act around her. That Aleksander’s orders wouldn’t be their sole influence and that she had a right to a presence of her own. That was what Genya kept telling her, but despite all the wise words Alina felt, feared that she wasn’t welcome. That she wasn’t wanted, valued or trusted any more, despite her powers, which she couldn’t use anyway.

But she was there, and she was the general’s bride. His wife. And for what that was worth she lifted her chin, thinking how that was something Aleksander would do, what he did even though he wasn’t in the right.

The kefta that Genya brought was almost completely black, with subtle gold embroidery. Alina winced but she put it on, feeling marked, unsure how to approach the fact that he would choose her colors or determine what she was to wear. It fit her perfectly (of course it did) and she even looked nice in it. Still, that didn’t make her happy or pleased. Alina sighed, squared her shoulders and decided - she had a task. She was supposed to find out what she could do for herself. And she would do that, black kefta or not.

Aleksander awaited her in his War Room. The tea was served on a small table next to a window, and a comfortable looking armchair was awaiting her. Alina was walking on her own, with Genya close by if she needed any help. She told herself her feet wouldn’t falter when she entered. This was the room from which she fled the palace, this was the room where they kissed, twice. Where she offered him her compassion, her light and her heart. Upon seeing that table, where he lifted her to kiss her better, more easily, Alina’s heart skipped. She kept walking. He rose from his armchair and if there was anticipation in his eyes he covered it quickly.

“Lady Kirigan,” he greeted. It felt horribly formal and detached, as if they were nothing to each other. Of course, when that name wasn’t even his, she thought. But at the same time, it reminded her, again, that *she* was his. And she had no idea how to greet him. Her husband? Her sovereign?

“General Kirigan,” she decided. A corner of his lip ticked upwards. She wasn’t sure what it meant, but his voice following that semblance of a smile was pleasant.

“It’s a joy to have you join me today,” he said. She simply nodded and sat down when he gestured towards the armchair. He looked at Genya. “Thank you, Miss Safin.”

It was Genya’s cue to leave, and she did so, after greeting both of them. Alina believed Aleksander would drop the appearances then but he did not. He continued in an equally pleasant, amicable tone. “Would you like some tea?” he asked. She agreed, accepting the teacup he offered her, and generous serving of pastries on a separate plate. There were flowers on the table, daisies and field lilies - nothing too emotionally charged and designed to spark memories. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better... thank you,” she said, watching him relax back into his chair after he offered her everything that was there to offer. She took her teacup and leaned back into the cushions. His fingers, elegant and long, played with the rim of his cup. Alina looked up at his face. He attempted another smile, but for a fraction of a moment he seemed tense, and his eyes sad.

“And you had a good rest, I hope?”

Alina wondered if he wanted to know if she experienced another nightmare. “I did, indeed,” she paused, observing him, his neatly combed hair, his watchful dark eyes. “And you?”

“Well enough,” he said, although he still seemed tired. She thought about it briefly, and noted it hadn’t been the case *before*. “I hope your strength is returning?”

“Don’t Healers tell you that?” Alina asked, not able to hold her tongue. This polite back and forth, this strange tiptoeing around the complicated, thorny heap of events and words and emotions that sat between them was setting her on edge. But if she lost her composure and pushed, Aleksander didn’t seem to budge. His manner remained calm.

"The Healers report to me. But I wanted," he paused, looking briefly at his tea, "*Hoped* to hear from you, how you're feeling."

There was that crack in the wall again. That vulnerability, a glimpse of something she had seen in this very room, and despite everything Alina found herself replying to him. To that call.

"It's... I can stand easier, if that's what you think. And I can walk better and I tire less frequently. But it's still -," she sighed, suddenly remembering her cell, her bound arms, the darkness she was kept in.

"Alina?"

"It's... nothing. I just remembered -" she paused and he leaned forward, just slightly, his eyes more serious. "I suppose I will not forget that. That... cell."

His gaze seemed to pin her to the spot - but not like in the tent when they were fighting over the stag collar. It was a heavy look, serious and concerned, but most of all burdened. With centuries and knowledge and things he had seen and Alina could guess at. She was doing her best to think him a monster, to convince herself that he was a merciless man made of darkness who wanted to use her. What she was looking at was a man who has experienced far more than she could imagine. And right now he didn't seem merciless at all.

"Our minds..." he paused, seemingly choosing the words and how to express himself, and it seemed difficult. "They're not built to sustain such memories. And these memories... they're not built in a way that lets us forget." He looked up and all she could see in his eyes was apology. Her mind didn't want to believe it, but all other parts of her could not unsee it.

Alina let out a careful, shaky breath. She kept her eyes on his, remembering how she told him that he could have made her his equal. Well here she was, sitting opposite him, deciding if she would be put in a spot below.

"So what do you do with such memories?" she asked.

He was thoughtful, his eyes distant. "At first you try to avoid them. Dream about them, think about... wonder if you could have done anything differently," Alina watched as he got lost in a memory, perhaps such a memory that refused to be forgotten. "They fade, somewhat... you learn how not to wake them. They're best left asleep. They become somewhat less painful. More bearable. But -"

"But they don't go away," she finished. He shook his head.

"No. They do not."

Alina looked to her side, through the window they were sitting close to. She could see the gardens, and Little Palace's stables not too far away. There was... *everything* that her small cell did not contain, and did not allow her. The grass, the cobblestones, the trimmed trees and bushes. There was crisp air outside. She remembered going for rides, with him, with Marie and Nadya, and by herself. She could, perhaps, do that once more. There was an entire *world* outside and a part of her ached for it.

"On a related note," Aleksander's voice brought her back to the present, "there is something I wanted to talk to you about." He waited until her attention was on him, his quiet mood giving way to the practical manner she was so used to once. "I have given a lot of thought to your security. I do not expect and do not wish for you to spend all your time behind closed doors, once you fully recover. But I am not inclined to the idea of you.. going about by yourself. Obviously, you still might need help, at least until your strength rebuilds. But -"

"You don't want just anyone talking to me?" Alina supplied, feeling herself getting angry again. Angry because the moment they just shared was lost and here he was, attempting to control her again.

"I do not," he said, his words definite. She looked down, at her lap, and the delicate porcelain cup held in her hands.

"You want to control me."

"I would much rather control everyone else," he said. Alina snorted.

"That is ridiculous."

"Is it? This palace is safe, as safe as it gets in all of Ravka. And yet, someone managed to get in here in order to kill you. Or, to kidnap you. *Several* someones, yes. But they killed Marie instead."

Alina opened her mouth to speak and closed it again. In that he did have a point. He continued.

"I can not tell you what to think of me," he looked down again, and she realized he was staring at his right palm, the flower shaped scar where her knife had struck him. "But I can do all in my power to assure someone does not put you in any form of danger. That is my duty."

"Your duty?"

"I am still your husband," he said in that same, heavy tone. *Despite you hating me* seemed unspoken, but still very much there.

"Fine," Alina said then, guessing correctly that this was something he was not going to let go. But if she knew anything about negotiation, it involved a compromise - both sides letting go of something, in order to gain something else. "So what is it that you had in mind?"

"I want a heartreder to accompany you at all times you're going somewhere by yourself. I would like it to be Ivan -"

"Ivan?!"

Aleksander paused, looking slightly exasperated. "Ivan is the *most powerful* heartreder in the Palace -"

“And he is also *your* heartrender. Your words, not mine. Besides, he hates me. You surely don’t want to give him such a loathsome task,” Alina said, observing his reaction, the way he opened his mouth to retort and then closed it. Did he expect her to just accept? Didn’t he always react like that, when she opposed him? She wasn’t sure what was real and what wasn’t, and trying to gauge his reactions while taking care of her own thoughts and emotions was taxing. She found herself wishing that she could just relax, just confide in him like she used to, feel safe and appreciated and *seen*. But she had to keep her guard up. She wouldn’t agree to suffer Ivan’s continuous presence.

“Would you prefer Fedyor instead?” Aleksander asked, sighing. It was the logical next option, and despite the fact that Alina expected him to insist on Ivan becoming her...shadow. Oh the irony of that thought.

“That is a better solution,” Alina said, thinking how having Fedyor around wouldn’t be nearly as unpleasant. “Acceptable to me.”

“Well then,” Aleksander said, sipping his tea. “Fedyor is a good, skilled heartrender. Not quite as powerful or quick,” Aleksander deemed. Not as merciless, Alina thought. “I much prefer that than no protection for you at all. That is something I don’t want to allow to myself.”

It sounded like he was concerned. It sounded like he cared what would happen to her. She couldn’t, shouldn’t believe it - and at the same time, she wanted to.

Suddenly something occurred to her. “Aleksander?”

He looked up, his face seemingly brightening a bit at the sound of his own name. The brief shine in his eyes tugged at something in her chest. She didn’t want to pay attention to that sensation. She tried very hard not to.

“Yes?”

Alina hesitated a moment. She wanted to know, and she didn’t see the reason why he wouldn’t tell her what she was about to ask.

“Where was Marie buried?”

*

An hour before the dinner was brought to the Vezda suite there was a knock on her door. Alina walked to the door herself, not needing to hold onto the furniture any more. Fedyor patiently awaited at the other side, his red kefta impeccable, and his hands clasped behind his back.

“Moya sovereniyia,” he greeted and bowed to her, deeper than any Palace protocol would require. Alina smiled. “I am honored to serve you.”

Alina smiled. He at least said it like he meant it, and he probably did.

“Now you officially are my maid,” Alina tried to joke, and to her relief he smiled.

“I will keep you safe and I won’t fail you,” he answered.

“I trust that you won’t.”

Fedyor was a person who smiled easily and he smiled plenty. He offered Alina his hand, his fist clenched tight. It felt sweet and assuring. “General Kirigan instructed me to take you to the mausoleum. He said that you would like to light a candle for Marie.”

“That is right,” Alina said, surprised that Aleksander took her wish so seriously, and reacted so promptly.

She took Fedyor’s arm, holding it until they passed the staircase and she was much more confident her leg wouldn’t slip. He mentioned as they walked that the General was attending a meeting with the officers overseeing implementation of the cease fire. Fedyor led her through the park, along the benches, towards the stables and well past them, until they reached a grey looking building with a single door and no windows. Alina made a mental note to inquire about that.

They entered quietly. Alina paused, taking in the place around her. The air inside felt heavy, and the reminders of death around her reminded her that all of them would all end up here some day. All of them - except Aleksander and her.

Fedyor walked slowly and she followed until he stopped in front of one tomb inside the wall - a small, squared tombstone indicating whose remains it kept safe.

When Alina had last seen Marie, she was excited and happy, pulling on the exact replica of Alina’s kefta. She even made a joke, something about looking so similar to Alina that nobody could tell them apart - Alina could not remember the exact words.

She stood there, trying to recall Marie’s face and her smile, the way she held her cup of tea and the way her voice sounded - finding that those precious details were fading. How unfair it was, she thought, to remember that dark cell in such detail. The cold, the way the shackles were biting into her skin, the way the entire room smelled - and at the same time to realize that the voice of someone who was a friend was bound to fade.

Fedyor offered her candles and matches. Alina took the match, but her hands were shaking and her eyes felt blurry.

“Allow me,” there was another voice - she looked up, to her left, and realized that Aleksander had materialized seemingly out of nowhere, and that he was gently taking the box of matches from her. Alina let him, distracted by their contact, by his fingers brushing hers, by the fact that her powers seemed to wake up when he barely touched her sleeve. She wiped her eyes and watched him light the first candle, handing it to her. Alina took it, placing it gently at the craved edge of the tomb. She thought she should say a blessing, whisper it at least, but it turned out that she

couldn't. But it didn't matter at the end - the two men were silent too, Aleksander lighting the candles one by one and handing them to Alina and Fedyor who placed them in front of the tombstone with Marie's name until it was bathed in light.

"Those whom we lost exist as long as we remember them," Fedyor said.

"A comforting thought," Aleksander observed.

"It was what my grandmother used to say," Fedyor paused, a small smile playing on his face. "And I find that she was right."

They stood there for a while, Alina thinking of Fedyor's words, of how her powers seemed to quiet and hide somewhere inside of her the moment when Aleksander pulled his hand from her. She missed the feeling of light buzzing under her skin, she missed Marie, she missed the way it was before.

And she missed *Aleksander* - or at least the idea of him.

As if sensing her thoughts, his hand squeezed Alina's shoulder. It felt spontaneous and genuine, and the sadness she carried - for the loss of Marie and friendships and trust and *him* - almost made her lean onto him.

She did not. But as they walked out, slowly and in quiet, Alina placed her hand onto the crook of his arm. She did it willingly and by herself, and she did it because she wanted to. The moment his palm covered her hand - when his skin touched hers - relief washed over her; and even though the sadness did not disappear, it felt subdued and bearable, and as if her soul was covered with a balm. The power in her veins was there again, a comforting presence within. Why did it answer him without fail?

"Aleksander," she called, her voice thin and small.

His hand tightened on hers. "Yes, my lady?"

She would have objected, but the contact with him felt so good, so natural and true that she couldn't mind. She wouldn't. It sounded far nicer than *Lady Kirigan*.

"I want to ask something."

"Feel free to ask," he said.

"I would like ... I would like you to include me in the treaty process," she said. "I ... wish to help. I wish to make Marie's death not meaningless," she told him as they slowly walked, attempting to gauge his reaction through the connection they shared. She wanted to make all of this worth *something*. She felt a shift in him, a tension, but she did not feel any intention of rejection.

"Very well," he said, and his voice sounded agreeable. "We should discuss this in detail. Would you like to do so tomorrow, over lunch?"

Alina took a moment to let his words play over her mind, as his thumb stroked the back of her hand - a small tenderness she perhaps should have denied him, but decided not to.

"That... that sounds good. Yes, I would like that," she said.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Were you ever a refugee, Alina?” he asked, no judgemental undertone in his words. Just... sadness.

“No. But to be a refugee, you need to have a home first. So it’s...” she shrugged, suddenly overcome with emotions and memories and things that were difficult to put into words. How the walls of Keramzin were just that - just walls. Nothing she ever missed, once she left. When she looked back at him, he was studying her quietly, as if he was trying to understand what she was thinking about. “Nowhere is home. Everywhere is home.”

Chapter Notes

A fair warning - this chapter talks about war, refugees, discrimination and racism, and it might feel slightly upsetting. But that's the point of this chapter, I guess. I apologize for all and any tears if they happen.

“I am pleased that you’re taking interest in the treaty process,” Aleksander stated, tall and elegant and incredibly put together this morning. He definitely looked *pleased*, his gestures tense, somehow barely contained, passing her different plates, tea, pastries, fruit, jam. If Alina was honest with herself, she was curious about his actions and the way he was approaching the subject and, well, *her* as well. What she expected was for him to order her around, to limit her breathing space and tell her where she was supposed to go and at whom to smile. Instead she had privacy, and time to rest and recover, the entire library at her disposal; and Fedyor who acted more like a company than a guard.

Maybe it was all to lull her into a false sense of safety. If that were the case, he would deny her request to be included in anything of significance. Instead, he was explaining to her the details of the treaty, the conditions settled and matters that required more negotiation. He let her see the list of prisoners that had been exchanged after the treaty was sealed. There she found Mal’s name. For a moment, a tiny moment Alina let herself feel that she did the right thing.

Aleksander was answering her questions while she was trying to find a hint of untruthfulness in his words, a lapse in logic, details that didn’t add up. There were none. He talked as she ate, and his meal was getting cold. Alina reminded him of it. He smiled and for a little while they ate in silence. “We’re expecting the first refugees in a week,” he supplied. Alina looked up.

“So soon?”

“Yes. People are leaving our west border, due to Westerns taking over parts of the territory, which used to belong to them... sixty something years ago,” he explained. Alina looked at her plate, still half full with simple, but delicious food. Was that a price of her freedom?

“How many?” Alina asked.

“About twenty families. That is about one hundred people -”

“Oh *Saints*. Do we even have housing for them?” she said before she could think of her use of pronouns, and if he noticed, he didn’t react. He leaned a bit towards her, taking a sip of her tea.

“There’s an abandoned theater building, outside the capital’s strict center, which could be repurposed. It’s good, and the walls are solid, and the roof doesn’t have any leaks. And -”

“Why was it abandoned?”

“The Tsar wanted a new one. A bigger one,” Aleksander explained, his voice carrying a barely hidden disdain. “Such *reasonable* spending with the war going on.”

“Well, the old building could be put to use again, at least. For something noble and good,” Alina offered. “You were going to say something else, too.”

“Yes. A never used military - complex at the outskirts of the city. The road is good and the houses are small but practical -”

“Barest minimum, you mean,” she said without true jest. He opened his mouth to reply. “I was in the military, remember?”

“You were,” he agreed, with slightest amusement in his eyes.

“Those people will need more than just roofs above their heads,” Alina said, her eyes looking over their shared table. Aleksander let out a sigh, his eyes suddenly distant. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Were you ever a refugee, Alina?” he asked, no judgemental undertone in his words. Just... sadness.

"No. But to be a refugee, you need to have a home first. So it's..." she shrugged, suddenly overcome with emotions and memories and things that were difficult to put into words. How the walls of Keramzin were just that - just walls. Nothing she ever missed, once she left. When she looked back at him, he was studying her quietly, as if he was trying to understand what she was thinking about. "Nowhere is home. Everywhere is home. It's... not something I could say I truly had except -"

Except when she first came here. He looked down, as if sensing her thoughts.

"I ... know. I spent... my childhood on the run."

His words hit in the middle of her chest. She felt the familiar pang of pain even though she didn't want to, she wanted to reach out to him, even though her reason warned that she shouldn't.

"Were there wishing wells?" Alina asked, realizing how cruel her words sounded the moment they left her mouth. Aleksander's eyes flashed, but instead of retaliating he looked down again.

"No. But I did spend a lot of time wishing I could be anyone else. That part was... *is* the truth."

She looked at him, and how he seemed somehow smaller than she was used to. And she tried and maybe even wished that she could find a lie in everything he was saying, but she couldn't. Her mind insisted that she couldn't trust him, even if he didn't tell her a single lie - yet there was a part of her that wanted to believe him.

"The people coming here probably had a home," she said, trying to steer the conversation back to what was important. *Unlike you and me* remained unsaid, and Alina decided to think about that some other time. How there was something that connected them and what it meant, and if it had to mean anything. "I've seen refugee camps. They're sad places. Hunger and diseases and just pointless existing. Do... we... want that here?"

"What are you saying?"

"I think that we can't just put people in houses, no matter how sturdy or pretty they might be. People need something to do. Some ..."

"Purpose?" Aleksander offered; a little world that felt so heavy. He knew what she wanted to say. He knew a lot more. He had seen a lot more than her, after all.

"Exactly," she didn't know how to handle his gaze, the way his words rang, the way she felt, so she stood and walked to the window. "I wouldn't want people who come here hoping for... salvation to get sick or die of hunger, while waiting at the Tsar's mercy," she looked at her hands. She tried to summon this morning after she woke up, just a tiniest ball of light, just to remember how it felt, but her wish was ungranted. No matter how many times she tried, her power did not respond. Alina wondered what was the point of everything, of the tent and her training and the collar if her hands were now numb and useless.

What was *her* purpose?

Aleksander stood as well and walked to her, keeping just a little distance between them. She looked at his hands, his long and elegant fingers, his precise movements.

"I am in agreement with you," he said, looking over the Little Palace grounds. "We will have to make careful plans."

"What do you mean?"

"The Tsar decides on many things. For instance, if foreigners - which is, essentially what these people will be to him - are even allowed to walk freely through the Capital. We will need a way to allow these people to feel useful and... integrate," he paused thoughtfully, "without crossing some lines."

"Which lines are that?"

Alina watched him frown, watched his features harden as he stared into the distance. Or perhaps, into the past.

"Imagine a nobleman with his purebred dogs.... finding strays gathering around his house," he said, the imagery of his words so real and painful.

Move away, Shu bitch. Go out, eat with the pigs.

"I... know what you mean," she said quietly, aware how her voice trembled and that he turned to look at her. She wondered what he meant with his words about his childhood, but couldn't bring herself to ask.

"When I was.... younger," he said, "being a Grisha was a death sentence. It was as if you were branded with some kind of *do not approach* warning. Or, ... *if found kill them* sign. Unwanted, dehumanized -" he paused.

"Aleksander -"

"It took... hundreds of years to change that in the slightest manner. If we could be useful, if we could make the Tsar more powerful and his armies victorious, then we could have an illusion of safety," his shoulders sagged and the shadows started gathering in the corners of the room. Alina knew what that meant, Alina could feel it - the resignation, the desperation, the knowledge that whatever he had done, he felt it wasn't enough. And she could hear his words echo through her past, calling to mind every time she was shunned because her hair was too dark, and her eyes looked wrong. "And that's how... we survived," he then looked at her, and she could not ignore the painful, watery look in his eyes. He shrugged. "It's about finding a way to survive. It might not be the ideal -"

Alina did not let him finish and did not let herself think it all through. She reached for his hand, impulsively, and the moment her skin touched his she could feel it. Her power, alive, waking up in her veins, ready to tug itself free. She wished for it, the light, the warmth, and the hope she felt when she told him about her vision of a better future. The light spilled from under her palm, not as forceful as before, but it was there. And when she had no words, no way to tell him what she wanted and what she feared, she let the light do it for her.

*

The following days were spent in preparations. Instead of burying herself in books, Alina insisted on catching up on the reports and plans. When she didn't understand the numbers, she insisted that Aleksander explain it to her. He would talk, always making sure to give her the context, the unfair circumstances, the reasons behind his less than noble choices. When he said that any orphaned children should be sent away, Alina insisted that they should find another solution, that any child should at least have a chance to keep their community, if not the people who loved them most. That no child should grow up under the pretense of care of some Ana Kuya, who didn't bother herself with bruises or tears or the fact that walls did not equal a home. And as they worked, as they negotiated the solutions, debated the supplies and rode out to see how preparations were advancing, Alina would almost forget that he was supposed to be her enemy.

The people who would need their help needed them as allies. He could be her enemy later.

*

Seven days after their first breakfast together, Ivan entered Aleksander's quarters just as they were finishing their morning tea. If the heartreder felt contempt for her, he did not show it; and he informed them both that the caravan from the western border had reached the city.

Alina stood at the same time Aleksander did, and the look she gave him was enough. He looked at Ivan.

"Find Fedyor. You both will accompany us."

And so it happened.

About forty members of Second Army were already there - healers, heartrenders, fabrikators, men in plain green uniforms who helped build the homes. The winter was still in the air, the wind picking up again.

Alina had seen the war, she had seen hurt soldiers, burned homes and the dead, left to be forgotten. She had seen all kinds of human misery, the pain and injustice, and how bleak the world around her was. But she was not prepared for the sight that greeted her.

She remembered Aleksander told her it would be about twenty families - about one hundred people or slightly more - but to her it looked like an endless procession of the lost, the abandoned, those who had nowhere to go, and nobody to turn to. Some had carriages, piled with random belongings and other people - usually those who were too sick or too old to walk. There was a man limping, with a crutch under his right arm. there was a pregnant woman sitting sideways on a horse who looked like he could barely move, and an old man - her father? - leading the animal by its tether.

But seeing a child - a lonely, tired child with no one by his side - it was what broke something inside of her.

She dismounted from her horse, and the three men accompanying her followed suit - Fedyor because he had to and Aleksander because he wasn't going to let her out of his sight. Ivan followed his commander, and all three followed her as she approached the boy, who could not be older than four, and who did not have strength to even cry. He did not protest when Alina approached and offered her arms to lift him up. The boy collapsed into her embrace.

She turned to three men - Fedyor not even trying to hide the pain from his expression, Ivan looking as stern as ever and Aleksander looking at her with a mixture of determination and compassion and something that seemed like pride.

"Call your men, General," she addressed Aleksander as she cradled the boy's head. "Call your healers. These people need help."

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Hello all! When I posted the last chapter I had a fit of insecurity and felt that the interest for this story had started to decline. I'm a person who enjoys writing and who writes to share it with others, and huge part of that joy comes from hearing from you all - what you thought, and how you felt all through the chapter or a story. For awhile there was a little feedback, and when that happens I tend to question myself and wonder what I did wrong. So I thought about not posting until I had most of this story written, or even the entire thing. But then again I feel excite and anxious to share the new material that I have, hoping to hear from you all who are still reading this.

So if you're still here, still following this tale and navigating this mess of a situation with me - please leave me a word, let me know what you thought, share your feelings and questions with me. It matters to me more than you can imagine. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the late afternoon Alina knew names and faces and their stories. She hadn't left the settlement even though Aleksander urged her to get some rest.

"Not until everyone is settled. Not until healers have seen everyone in need of help." By the late afternoon all of them were exhausted, but Aleksander was handling it better than her. Fedyor had brought bagels and apples around midday and they ate it huddled around the fire. Alina thought she wasn't truly hungry, but she noticed at the same time how Aleksander seemed thinner than usual. However, by the end of the day he was still able to go on, oversee everything, give out directions and coordinate - at the same time she suddenly felt completely drained.

She sat on a crate and it seemed that both Fedyor and Aleksander noticed at the same time what she kept ignoring through the entire day. Back in her First Army days she could run around all day long, but attempting to do so now was probably not the best idea. Aleksander approached and if he was going to scold her for overrunning her own strengths, she wasn't going to protest. However when he did reach her he knelt, and the entire camp, all the Grisha there, all soldiers and everyone else nearby could see the Second Army General kneeling.

"Alina," he didn't seem to care that basically everyone around them was looking, but Alina was aware. For a man who put so much on appearance, impression and importance of self presentation he seemed completely careless now. She held his eyes and he seemed worried, searching her face for signs of how badly she felt.

"Just tired," she said in a hushed tone.

"I should take you home," he stated. Her mind wanted to protest the last word, but her hand slid into his. "Come on, there's a carriage. I don't want you to ride."

"I can ride," she stated, and she probably could but the prospect of sitting in a carriage already seemed so much more comfortable. She could see him frown, she could almost feel a counter argument forming, but then he took a long breath.

"I know. But I would really prefer it if we took the carriage back."

"But you should stay here -"

"I can return later. I want to see you safely back to your rooms."

Alina paused, trying and failing to argue with that. "Okay."

He pulled her up and if the way he placed her arm into the crook of his elbow was just a little possessive, she decided she wouldn't dwell on it. Feeling his palm on top of her skin made her realize that she was cold - which meant she was really, really tired. The carriage wasn't too far away - Aleksander helped her climb in and she sat as he talked to Ivan and Fedyor, giving them instructions how to handle most pressing problems. Alina let herself sink into the cushion behind her back, and despite the carriage not being the best example of comfort, it was dry and significantly warmer than the outside. Her body was aching and her eyelids felt heavy. Against her own exact will she felt herself fall asleep.

If there was a certain darkly clad shoulder next to her, right where she would lean her cheek, she found she couldn't truly mind.

*

Alina woke up in what seemed to be the middle of the night, disoriented and tired, sans boots and kefta. She sat up and looked around, making out the shapes of familiar furniture against the small amount of light that came through the not completely closed door.

"Aleksander?" she called, wondering where he went, because him helping her into that carriage seemed like just a moment ago.

A moment later he seemed to materialize in that same corner of her room where she saw him on her first night back here. Except this time all he had on was a towel around his hips.

She opened her mouth to speak but the surprise, and the sight of him almost bare rendered her momentarily speechless. Her surprise was matched by his expression as he looked towards her in the semidarkness.

"Seems like you called -" he said, keeping the towel secure around himself. Alina realized she was still gaping like a fish, taking in the sight of him. She had never seen him without the tunic with silver clasps on the front, and she guessed that he was lean underneath all those clothes, but without anything on he seemed *fragile*. And only then she realized he had two distinct scars all across his chest, starting at his left shoulder and ending somewhere near his right hip.

"What are those?"

"Volcra," he said. It was an explanation enough. Alina winced, realizing exactly when that happened. She and Mal left him for the dead inside The Fold. The scars on his face were faint but these were striking, wide and differently colored than the rest of his skin, and it had only meant that his injuries were significant and that his body struggled to knit itself back. "It's fine," he said, and she realized just how long she was staring at him. "What happened? Why did you," he paused, his lip tilting up, "summon me?"

"Summon you?"

"That's essentially how it works, either one of us has to think -"

"Aleksander," she paused, incredulous, and her cheeks were flushing bright and hot. She wondered if he could see. "I cannot summon a sphere the size of a *pea*. How am I summoning you?"

"You... what? What do you mean... you *cannot* summon? But this morning -"

"It works only if I... touch you. It... doesn't work with anyone else," she uttered as they stared at each other. His lips twitched, as if something painful tugged at his face. "Aleksander?"

He walked over to her and sat down on the bed, near her foot. Alina wasn't quite sure what startled her - his closeness while he was almost naked, or the fact that she could feel the bed dip.

"I don't understand this," she gestured between them. "How is this...?"

"How is it possible?" he asked and she nodded, pulling her feet to her and hugging her knees, while staring at his chest, the way it looked, and wondering how it would feel underneath her hand. Aleksander moved a little, sitting sideways, making more space even though he wasn't crowding her at all. "We had our powers combined, we both had amplifiers -"

"You mean, *you* combined them," Alina said, staring at the scar starting near his shoulder and wondering how much that had hurt. She could see his slow, long exhale.

"I did."

"And that created ... this?"

"Probably," he said. "We were connected in a significant way. I was able to -" she could see him pause and look down at his hands, his right palm held in his left; the knife scar was still visible there.

"You could use my power," Alina said, keeping only facts in her tone, just as if she was retelling history.

Their history. He looked up, his eyes searching. Repenting. His shoulders were slumped and his spine curved forward, and in the faint light that filtered into the room Alina could see outlines of his muscles, the striking ridge of his clavicle. His chest rising and falling. A scar above his heart.

"You ... *removed* my amplifier. But the connection remained. Possibly because we were connected from the start."

"The start?"

"The tent. When I -"

"*Oh*."

"So. You're saying that you cannot summon?"

Alina nodded, thinking if she should be having this conversation with him at all - but then, who else was there? She doubted Genya would know as much as he did and imagined Fedyor would find a polite way to excuse himself out of a conversation that wasn't his to have. Alina looked at Aleksander's still open palm and the dark bracelet around his wrist. He was probably having a bath with it still on.

"It's not just that. It's... I feel like it's not there. I cannot feel -" Alina paused, her hand reaching for the base of her throat. She thought of the pain when David had placed the collar on her - not the physical, but the realization that Aleksander would do that to her; push her into something that she was screaming against. The same man who gently held her and kissed her and asked if she was sure, if she wanted his hands on herself. She thought of weeks spent in hiding, of how she pushed her light down, how she kept it hidden and was still caught, how she was bound to the wall and then to him, how each new moment stripped a bit of her power, bit of her choices and freedom and possibility to direct her own feet, until she couldn't find any light in herself at all.

And then, how cruel was the irony that it literally exploded under Aleksander's barest touch?

Alina could see him look down and swallow hard, then look back to her, his eyes wet. He offered her his open palm as if he was saying *take it. Take it back. Take everything that's yours.*

And she took his hand. Her bones were suddenly warm, light inside of her answering a call. Somehow they fit in some inexplicable way, and when she held him like that, there were no thorns. No pain and no doubt, no shackles and no darkness.

"It is there," he stated, turning their joint palms over. "I can feel your light, just as you can feel my shadows."

All the previous times she'd pull her hand away, careful about the amount of contact she was willing to give. But this was different, this was him offering her something that was *hers*. That was how she thought about it when she lightly squeezed his hand and tugged the light to herself, wished for it to envelope her in its warmth, to pour from her bones and be hers again. They shared a look, scars on his face catching shadows from the glow that slipped from between their palms. "It's still right there," he said, soothing, assuring. Alina let go of him, slowly pulling her hand back and looked at her palm. She felt the echo of it all, like a distant memory of sharing her power with him, the muted, empty feeling spreading through her anew.

"It's not," she said as her heart sank.

"Alina," he called and she looked up again to meet his eyes. "You have been through a lot. And in a way it was too much. You lost the sense of control. That is why. There's nothing wrong with you. Everything else is -"

"Wrong," she finished, looking longingly towards his hand.

Did she want *this* too to be wrong?

"It will all come back," he said. She didn't understand, she didn't know how that could be, and yet she found herself believing.

But she couldn't allow herself to be naive any more.

"Aleksander," she spoke. "I can't just sit and wait until it somehow happens. I need to -"

She could feel his intake of breath again as he nodded. "Would you like to speak to Baghra?"

Two things occurred to Alina almost instantaneously. That she didn't even think of Baghra ever since she was brought back - and that she most definitely didn't have any desire to see her. And that wasn't something Alina wished to think about, either.

And obviously, he didn't want her to talk to Baghra, at least not just yet - but if she wanted it, he would respect her choice.

"I'd rather not."

He nodded. "Okay. Then, you shall find plenty of material to read inside the library. And I'll refrain from giving you pointers. Except if you should ask," he said, he even smiled a tiniest bit, or at least she thought he did. "Try to relax now. I have brought you here but obviously, did not - would not make you any more comfortable beyond your dress, so you might want to -"

She smiled in return, adding a bit awkwardly, "Well you might want to get dressed because - because you will catch a cold."

"Oh," his smile was slightly bigger and definitely real now. "I assure you I shall be fine."

*

The following days were busy - in fact, they were so packed with activity that Alina did not have much time to do anything, but involve herself in helping the refugees. Alina visited the refugee camp each day. By the end of the week she knew each family, each orphan, each mother that had lost a husband. She oversaw sorting of the supplies, helped create lists of clothes and furniture and other necessities for everyone. She knew who got what, and what was still missing. *You have seemed to become the general here*, Aleksander joked one day, and Alina didn't fail to notice both his pride and the not so favorable reaction of several Grisha that stood nearby.

The thing was, there were people at Little Palace who obviously were not glad that she was back. They never said anything to her face, but Alina could sense it. She spent her life being an outcast, an unwanted person among other unwanted, double cursed by the lack of anyone she could call her own. It hurt, but she did not have the time to dwell on it. There were people who needed her help.

Genya would arrive early and help her get ready. They'd share the first tea as Genya combed her hair. Alina would go to Aleksander then, usually finding him near that big window while the breakfast awaited. First few times the table contained a wide variety of food, but lately she noticed he asked for food she had enjoyed the most. She also noticed how much he preferred sweet things, from the extra sugar in his tea, to pastries deliciously filled with apple jam.

They'd talk about various things during their meal, but the topics most discussed were the events on the border related to the treaty and the refugees, the supplies and the ways to get more people involved with work where they could earn their living, instead of simply waiting for mercy and noblemen's leftovers. Aleksander was willing to listen to her endlessly, sometimes asking questions that helped her clear her thoughts, sometimes simply letting her vent her frustrations. She would forget the stag's collar, the events inside the Fold and he wasn't The Black heretic any more - he was just Aleksander, this man who shared the breakfast table with her and was also her war - treaty husband.

Sometimes she wondered what that truly meant. Alina didn't remember her parents, she did not know if they had a loving marriage, and Ana Kuya was unmarried and burdened by running an orphanage full of unwanted, unloved children, and thus Alina grew up observing marriages from a distance, not really certain how the union of two people would look, observed from inside out.

Was what they had here bad? She couldn't answer that - well actually she could, but then her mind would rebel against her observations. And those observations were - Aleksander was considerate. He was careful not to push her. To the best of her knowledge, he was truthful. He made sure she was protected, healthy and free to do as she pleased, and when she decided to get involved and help the people who had lost their homes, he encouraged her, just as he encouraged her the first time around, to truly master her powers. So her conclusion would be that this, what they had, was not that bad; actually not bad at all - but if she would say that to herself, wouldn't that mean that she agreed with him? That she excused his terrible actions just because he was treating her kindly? The same person could be both kind and cruel, and she would remind herself of that each day -

And then there was another issue as well.

Ever since she saw him wearing nothing but a towel, she couldn't stop thinking about it. The way his skin looked, the way the scars stood out on his pale chest. Every time he neared her she was acutely aware of his proximity and his touch now brought another layer of reaction, because it helped her remember both his power and the way he kissed her on the night of the Winter fete. Alina tried to ignore it, tried to downplay it all thinking it was simply because she had seen him almost nude and she felt lonely, and it would be a normal reaction. Those thoughts would go away.

Except they did not. They would come when she was alone, in her bed and trying to sleep. And sometimes, those thoughts would bring him to her, through the strange connection they shared and he'd ask her if she was okay, if she had a bad dream, and she hoped he wouldn't see her flushed cheeks or how her eyes would linger at the opening of his nightshirt.

He would then proceed to tell her something amusing, or silly, or some ridiculous tidbit of ravkan history, in a way that no book ever could provide. And then he would bid her goodnight, and she would think of the sweet small smile on his lips as she closed her eyes and willed herself into sleep.

*

The day that would prove to change everything started as any other. Genya arrived with the first sun, exasperated about Tsaritsa's new demands regarding her beauty routine.

"Why won't she simply accept that she would grow old and ugly," Genya said, and she and Alina shared a mean laugh. Being with Genya felt almost exactly as before. Alina got used to the new kefta, its striking red and blue color, unique just as Genya was. She asked about David, the only topic that could make Genya's cheeks redden and teased her a bit.

"You look at him when he is not looking and he tends to do the same," Alina said, enjoying Genya's blush that ruined her impressively straight face.

"Well. The same can be said about the General and yourself," the retaliation was unexpected, but Alina could see her own blush bursting on her cheeks. "Oh, don't try to deny it. You *do* look at him. As does he look at you."

"He does *not* -"

Genya sighed. "Oh Alina. *Everyone* sees it. He cares so much for your comfort that he stopped paying attention to others, and what they might say. And that may not be the best thing -"

"What do you mean?" Alina asked, confused at Genya's words and sudden emotion that seized her chest - worry.

"The General knelt in front of his wife who does not care for him. She barely suffers his presence and ever since she arrived, she did not once let him bed her," Genya said, and Alina knew those were not her words. Gossip was not something Alina got herself involved in, but she knew it existed, and she knew it could be mean. She did not expect this, though; or perhaps, she simply did not want to know.

"I have not... did not....," she tried, but Genya stopped her with a gentle arm on her shoulder.

"In this world pretenses are everything. It matters how something looks, how something seems. What you're doing for all those people is noble, important and necessary. But it also seems that to you otkazat'sya refugees bear more importance than your lonely husband."

Lonely husband?

Alina opened her mouth but Genya stopped her again. "He has ordered the rooms adjoining his to be rearranged. So that you could use them and live there."

Alina's heart leapt in her throat, for several different reasons. Having him just one door away excited and terrified her in equal parts, and she didn't want to debate with herself on the reason why. As she was considering this new bit of information - just when was he going to tell her this? - Genya was patiently finishing the work on Alina's hair.

"Alina," Genya sighed, and there was something heavy in her eyes. "I may not know what happened between the General and you. But he is your husband and it is your prerogative to bed him, if you wish. It does not matter what happened, what he did or what anyone might think of you. It is your *right*," Genya smiled a tiny, wicked smile. "So why not use it, in case you want to?"

*

Alina hoped that the blush which Genya's words caused had faded from her face. Her head reeled from the news she learned - the gossip and the joint rooms that Aleksander ordered arranged, and the implication of it all. When she entered he was in a good mood, he was actually arranging flowers in a vase - three delicate blue irises that sent a shock through her. He smiled at her, but when he took in her appearance the smile faded.

"What happened?" he asked. Alina wasn't sure what she was feeling or thinking, if she was angry, or worried or anxious; what she should think about him putting himself in a precarious position with his subordinates that were now talking behind his back, and she was definitely not calm enough to address it as she probably should - with calm and reason.

"I am upset," she started. His eyebrows knitted together in what seemed like worry.

"I can see that."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"About what?" He looked clueless and innocent, standing there with the flowers that were obviously meant for her. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to hate him. She wanted to be repulsed.

She couldn't.

"Our joint rooms?" she asked and wondered at the same time if this was their most married moment so far.

Aleksander sighed and looked away. Then he set the flowers aside - and Alina could see how his shoulder sagged, how he seemed to crumble on himself, and for a moment she saw him kneeling in front of her in that tent, his palms open and offered to her. When he started to turn towards the window she found herself right in front of him.

"Aleksander," she tried to sound softer. For some reason he could barely look at her.

"I was going to tell you," he said.

"But?"

She waited for him to speak. It seemed that, whatever he was going to say, pained him. "Aleksander," she repeated quietly this time. He looked down.

"I was certain you would refuse," he said.

Alina did not have the chance to reply, or to think about the sadness in his tone. Ivan entered the room, looking alarmed, and Fedyor followed, his expression equally grim.

"What happened?" both Alina and Aleksander asked and for a moment Ivan looked between them as if he wasn't sure who to address first. Which only spoke about the intensity of his distress.

"Moy soverenyi," he said, "moya soverenyia," he added then, giving Alina small and curt nod. "There was an accident"

"What kind of accident?" Aleksander asked, the tension of the previous conversation dissipating.

"One of the children at the settlement," Ivan started, "he only has a mother - he nearly stopped a man's heart, in what seems to have been a fit of rage. Few people have tried to..." Ivan looked at Alina and then Aleksander, who gave Ivan a pointed look.

"Well? Say it?"

"Few people tried to stone her. She is injured, the boy is injured, I have sent a healer, but..."

Alina saw Aleksander's face turning grim and stormy, his eyes filling with something she had never seen on him. Helplessness. He looked at Alina, and she gave him a resolute look and a nod. Whatever their misunderstandings were, this had to be taken care of immediately.

"We're going there. Now," Aleksandar said.

Chapter End Notes

Find me on tumblr @ vesperass-anuna

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone - first of all THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH. I couldn't believe all the encouragement and feedback and kind words you left me the last time. You made me happy and you made me feel like I was living in every writer's dream. This chapter, okay, this chapter is when things start to change in earnest and I was so excited to write it, I am really excited to share it. It's the part of the story that I was waiting to reach and to share. Please let me know how you liked it, please, please, please take time to write back even if it's just a few lines. It really matters to me more than I can say - and after i post this I am going back to answer all of your replies, which I couldn't do over the past week. Thank you all so much, again!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"The child cannot stay here," Aleksander's voice carried over conversation and murmurs with an unmistakable undertone of disapproval, and animosity mixed with fear.

"Well you better take that... *thing* away from here," came a comment from inside the gathered group. They stood at the center of the refugee settlement, on a small clearing, surrounded by most people who now lived there. Alina held her breath. She could feel Aleksander's anger more than she could see it - the nearly imperceptible clench of his jaw and the way his power stirred when she reached out and lightly touched his arm. He could Cut whoever spoke on the spot, but Alina was fairly certain that he wouldn't - it would be unwise, cruel and just plain stupid.

And if anything Aleksander wasn't stupid.

Was it like this for the entirety of his life? Was he called a thing when he was a child? How many times did he face something like this?

"A child is not a thing," she spoke before she could think it through - she felt it, and she said it. There was a commotion within the group. "If a child hits you, would you call him a thing? It can hurt you without knowing that it can hurt you."

"A child could hit you but that won't stop your heart," another man said, somewhat hesitantly, while eyeing Fedyor and Ivan. Both looked serious and grim, but not threatening - although with Ivan it was hard to tell. He seemed to have one single expression and Alina couldn't recall seeing him smile.

"A heartreder child cannot stop your heart or cause any serious harm," Fedyor spoke. "For something like that a heartreder needs to be trained, and to command their power completely."

"So he's a child that will someday become a killer," the man retorted and many others nodded.

Alina wanted to reply, she wanted to yell, she wanted to say something that would make them understand that it wasn't that simple or straightforward and a child was still a child, no matter the potential, but this time it was Aleksander who gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We cannot argue with your beliefs, no matter how mistaken they may be," he spoke. Alina recognized the upwards chin tilt, the firm set of his shoulders, the cold gleam in his eyes. It said *you will not argue with me*. "I will not tolerate violence here. Any violence, from anyone. This is a shelter. The child will be taken to learn how to master his abilities. What I want to know is why a child reacted in that way. What provoked this?"

His question was followed by silence instead of murmurs and complaints, reminding Alina of those times when Ana Kuya rounded them all up and questioned who broke her new cabinet. You don't complain or set yourself apart if you know there is guilt.

The silence stretched. Aleksander gave Ivan a look, and Ivan nodded, walking among the people and pulling one man out.

"You're certain?" Aleksander asked.

"He did it, *moy soverenyi*," Ivan replied firmly.

"How can you accuse someone without any evidence?" a woman from the group spoke. Alina knew her.

"Polina, hush," another, older woman spoke. The people who looked at Aleksander as if he were a savior were now looking at him with fear in their eyes.

"A heartreder doesn't only stop hearts, you see," Fedyor said. "We can hear heartbeat and ascertain one's emotions, and this man here.... is showing more fear than any of you -"

"Well maybe he is just scared of what you all will do to us," Polina spoke again, ignoring the older woman who was now pulling her arm. "No, *let me speak*. I am not afraid of their Black General," she said, but instead of looking at Aleksander, she looked at Alina.

"And what exactly did we do up to this point?" Alina felt something bitter and suffocating rising in her chest. Aleksander spent every day here, ever since the refugees came. He was efficient and thoughtful, he listened and he worked, he lost hours of sleep just to try to make everything better.

"I know that we lost homes because of you. Because *you* had to be saved from that prison," the woman threw the words at Alina. "You are *no saint*. There are no saints -"

“That’s enough,” a middle aged man walked from the middle of the group - Dimitry, someone else often seemed to turn for help, and he would in turn talk to the soldiers or Alina or Aleksander. “And what you’re accusing Sankta Alina of, is simply not true. You all remember what living on Westerns’ land was like. They would have taken it from us with or without a treaty,” Dimitry said and then turned to Ivan. “I have not seen what had happened, heartrender. But I have heard that this one -” he pointed at the man whom Ivan was still holding by the shoulders, “he tried to steal food from Nadenka and her son. Vadim must have been scared for his mother.”

When Dimitry finished, everyone was silent - only not in fear but in defeat.

“Did anyone see it?” Aleksander asked. After a short silence another man spoke.

“I did. What Dimitry said was true -”

Alina wanted to ask him why in Saints name he did nothing to stop it all from happening, but one shared look with Aleksander told her it was better to leave this issue for some other time.

“So the boy - Vadim - was provoked. By fear for his mother’s life. Another child might have soiled themselves or cried, but Vadim has an ability he cannot control yet. Luckily nobody was harmed in any serious manner but - none of this would have happened if Vadim and his mother were not assaulted,” Aleksander’s voice bookered no dispute. “Which means the sole responsible person for this is him -” he looked at the man Ivan was keeping captive. “The boy and his mother did not deserve what *some of you* have done to them.”

“It’s not what all of us did. Or what we might approve,” Dimitry said to Aleksander and then looked at Alina. “I beg your forgiveness, moy Sankta,” he said.

Alina nodded. “If anything, I understand the anger over unfairness you all have endured,” she spoke. The memory of the Fold flashed quickly before her eyes, the volcra, their screams, the shadow creatures Aleksander had summoned to protect the skiff. She looked at him, his posture stiff and tense.

“Ivan, release the thief,” Aleksander said. “I have not come here to punish anyone, but to bring the boy to safety. But rest assured I will not tolerate any further violence against anyone here. Whoever thinks they can steal or beat another person or harm another person in this place... they may leave, now,” he said, glancing at Dinitry. “Take us to Vadim and his mother.”

*

When Dimitry brought them to the small house Nadenka and her son had settled in, the woman was being treated by Sonya, and the boy was pacing around them, worried about his mother, but also curious about what Sonya was doing.

“But how do you *know* a bone is broken?” Alina heard a little voice speak.

“I can feel it. Just like you can hear my heart beating. Can you hear my heart beating?” Sonya spoke kindly. They have all entered the small space - Vadim was about to reply but he was momentarily distracted by five people who just walked in.

“Oh,” Was all Nadenka said, pulling her arm close to her chest once Sonya released it. “Have you - come for him?” She was looking at Aleksander. Alina could see the anguish on her face, the sudden tears in her eyes that she tried not to shed. Aleksander could have said anything then, could have ordered Ivan to just take the boy, but instead of doing that, he looked at Alina, his eyes asking for *something* .

“Well, I hear your son has a special talent,” Aleksander said.

“Oh, I am not certain, *moy soverenyi* ,” Nadenka said, her eyes huge and pleading, and Alina understood she did not want to lose her child. “He had never -”

Aleksander nodded. “Until today. I am certain you want him to be safe -”

“Of course. But I -”

“I have heard that you are a seamstress, Nadyenka,” Alina said. “Is that true?” she shared a look with Aleksander and could see the change, the slight shine in his eyes.

“It is true, moya Sankta,” the woman replied.

“We need more women with your skill,” Alina spoke, feeling how Aleksander stepped closer to her, his shoulder right next to hers. “The work clothes for the palace staff, repairs which are needed nearly on a daily basis ... I am hoping that you would agree to work for the General,” she said, mindful of each word, of how she addressed Aleksander.

“Your son needs to be taught how to master his abilities,” Aleksander picked up where Alina had left off. “And during that time, you would be at your work. You could spend time with him, after your shift was done,” he said.

“And tuck him into bed, knowing both of you are safe,” Fedyor added.

And nobody would steal your food again, Alina thought, but remained silent. She observed Nadyenka, wiping her eyes and now trying not to smile, looking everywhere *but* at Aleksander and Alina, who both wanted to stay, to hug this woman and comfort her, and promise everything would be all right; and at the same time, she wanted to leave, feeling like an intruder to a such private moment.

It was Vadim who spoke next. "What are you all talking about?"

Alina was not prepared for that question - it seemed that neither was Aleksander. But Fedyor was.

"We are making some exciting plans, you see -" he squatted down, so he was at eye level with the boy. "For you and your mother to come with us, to Little Palace."

Vadim observed him for a little while. "Why is it called Little Palace? Is it small? How can a palace be little?" he asked, and Alina clearly saw Aleksander grin for a moment, but even more astonishing, she was almost certain she had heard a chuckle from Ivan's direction.

"It is not small, but there's an even bigger palace next to it. And that one is called the Grand Palace. Which makes ours the Little Palace."

"Oh," Vadim said, intently observing Fedyor and his kefta, his tiny face turning serious. "Are you like me?"

Fedyor smiled. "I am a heartreuder. Just like you."

"Oh! That means you can make me go faint? Just like I did to Igor -"

"Well, I could. I don't know. Want me to try?"

Vadim narrowed his eyes at Fedyor. "Hm. I bet you can't do it," he said. Alina watched Fedyor make a comical face, as if he were caught.

"Well I probably can't," Fedyor said, and then pointed with his thumb behind his back, at Ivan. "But *he* can. And you can learn too, and many other things," Fedyor added. "How do you like that?"

"Can mama come with me?"

This time Aleksander spoke. "She indeed can come with you."

Vadim shifted slightly to look at Aleksander. There was no fear in his eyes, which was often present in adults, no matter how Aleksander addressed them. To vadim Aleksander was simply just another adult - perhaps a slightly strange one, but that was all.

"And what can you do?" the boy asked. If he noticed his mother stiffening, he did not seem to care. Aleksander stepped forward, crouching next to Fedyor. He looked at ease, his lips tugging slightly upward. Alina knew that smile, the genuine amusement and saw his shoulders losing tension.

"Tell me what is your favorite animal, Vadim?"

He looked at Aleksander shyly for a bit and then he smiled.

"A goose," he said.

"All right," Aleksander answered, definitely smiling now. Alina watched as he touched his hands together, his movements somehow softer than usual. He opened his right palm - a shadow bloomed from it, delicate like a silk scarf, twirling between him and the boy, and then it turned into a distinct shape of a goose. It flapped its wings and seemed to walk around them for a bit, before it dissipated into the air. It earned Aleksander a bright smile. When Alina looked up from them, she could *see* Ivan smiling as well.

"That was very pretty," healer Sonya said. "*Moy soverenyi* . I do think that we should go now. Nadenka will still need to rest."

"Very well," Aleksander said, giving the boy one last, kind smile. He stood. "I will ask you, Sonya, to stay here with Vadim and his mother. I will send a carriage."

"Could Fedyor also stay?" Alina suggested. "Just in case," she could see the counter argument on Aleksander's face, and the concern in his dark eyes. "I will go with you," she added quickly, hoping her look was soft and convincing. "I will be safe."

Whatever his thoughts were, her words seemed to mellow it all, and she knew he would agree even before he spoke.

"Of course, my lady," he answered.

At that moment Alina felt truly and genuinely proud.

*

The following events happened in a span of a couple of days, but each time Alina thought about them, she felt as if it was just a blur, just one long, very long day and night.

Two days after being brought to Little Palace, Healer Sonya informed Alina that Vadim was ill. She explained that he developed a fever and a rash. A *vetryanaya ospa* , she explained, adding that the boy was thin, and not very strong and if this had happened in an older child, with a better grasp on his powers, then he might have not gotten sick at all.

"Can you help him?" Alina asked, worried, because she remembered what that miserable disease could do. One boy from Keramzin ended up blind after contracting it. She herself was sick for five days - she remembered the rash vividly, and the fever. But it seemed to be worse for the

adults. A cook who caught it once from sick children did not make it. He was sick for two weeks and then died.

"Oh, of course. It is contagious and that means, once contracted the body has to fight it. But I will treat him daily, I will reduce his fever, and that and plenty of rest should help. He won't be able to go out and see other children while he is sick. The children here are in much better condition, but we need to remain careful," Sonya explained.

Alina thanked her. She asked about Vadim several times over the next couple of days. The situation at the refugee settlement was mellowing down, and Aleksander was proposing that all the children there should be tested. Best to avoid new surprises and problems, he said to her over dinner, about five days later. She agreed, and he offered to show her her new rooms, if she pleased. Everything was more or less finished, and he hoped she would use them. She could have access to his private library, and he would worry less about her safety.

"You should have told me before," she said, trying to keep the judgement out of her voice. Perhaps it wasn't a bad idea, and perhaps the rumors and gossip would stop. "But yes. I would like to see it all."

"Tomorrow after breakfast?" he said, watching her tentatively over a glass of kvas.

"I ... would like that," she said, taking her own glass from the table.

Next morning, when Alina arrived for breakfast, Aleksander seemed restless. He was pacing along the room when she came in, his hair in slight disarray and unusual color on his cheeks.

"Aleksander," she said, observing him carefully. "Are you feeling well?"

"Quite... okay, actually," he said, taking a seat to her left, something he started doing only recently. This way he was sitting much closer and Alina could observe him better. He took a glass of water and drank it at once - so unusual because he preferred to start his day with tea. "I just have not slept well, that is all," he said. That felt plausible enough, so Alina settled down for her meal, but was unable to relax. There was a certain nervous energy coming off from him, completely uncharacteristic to the point that it irritated her. And just at a point when she was about to tell him that he was not a pleasant company this morning she noticed it.

"What is that on your neck?" Alina asked, feeling herself freeze in her chair. He looked at her, and reached with his hand, feeling with his fingers along his neck until he found it - three tiny red spots, which could be one thing only.

"This? It itches," he said, glancing at her. "Ah, that's is why -"

Alina stood, reaching for his hand. His skin was warm to the touch - too warm. She leaned the back of her hand against his forehead and he just sat there, taken by surprise, which was why he didn't protest when she took his chin in her hand, making him shift so she could take a look at the other side of his face and neck. Surely, he had the rash, he had more of it, red spots along his left ear shell, and then more at the back of his neck, and probably more underneath the kefta and the undershirt he wore.

"You've caught it. *Vetryanaya ospa*," Alina told him as he watched her, incredulous.

"But... that's otkazat'sya child illness -" he said. "That's impossible -"

"Aleksander. Did you have it as a child?" she asked, completely serious, trying not to panic. But he was an adult, and it was so much worse for adults, and in fact, she did not remember an adult who got it and lived.

"I don't remember, but -" he paused, his face softening. He took the liberty to take her hand and she let him, her heart hammering in her chest. "Alina. I am a Grisha. Our powers keep us healthy, and besides we have healers here," he spoke. And yes, she knew all of that too, but somehow she wasn't able to calm down.

And he knew it. He took both of her hands in his.

"*Milaya*," he said, so gently, and she trembled at that word. "Are you worried about me? Please don't be. I am going to be okay."

Somehow his softness and his certainty could not quiet her worries.

"I don't feel all that bad, at all," he said sweetly, slightly tugging at her hands and she smiled. She held his fingers a bit tighter.

"Fine. I believe you. But you need to see a healer. And you need to stay within your rooms until you recover."

"Why?"

It seemed that he genuinely did not know and that was a wondrous thought. The Darkling, The Black General, who knew so much about everything, had so little knowledge about something so ordinary?

"Because the disease is contagious and someone might get it from you. Once you have it, you cannot catch it again. I had it as a child. We need to make sure that everyone who enters your rooms is certain that they have had it as well."

"Okay," he said, straightening in his chair. "I will stay here and... deal with the paperwork."

Alina sighed, wondering what would have to happen to make him rest.

"Not as much as I usually do," he added, and that finally made her smile.

*

Alina had Healer Sonya come and determine what Aleksander's condition was. She put her hands on him, and within a minute his fever went down. Sonya seemed confident that he was doing well, all things considered, and that he shouldn't face too much trouble. She did advise him to lay down and leave all the reports for later.

Alina made him promise to do so, insisted to see him actually go there.

"What about your rooms?" he asked, standing at his bedroom door. She stood just two steps away.

"It can wait until you get better. *Please*," she said, nagged by a bad feeling, a premonition.

"Don't be so worried, milaya," he told her and smiled.

*

Her day was hectic up until lunch - she went to the settlement with Fedyor, talked to Dimitri, talked to the healers there. One woman went into labor and Alina sent for a midwife. After that she reviewed a new list of supplies and decided to go to talk to Nadenka later, after she had a chance to eat. Then she thought she could eat with Aleksander. Even if he was busy with his own reports, which he probably was (she didn't believe him one bit when he promised he would rest), he was probably bored. He could use some company, if he hadn't eaten by then, of course. Alina climbed the stairwell, Fedyor following her, greeted David and few other Fabrikators who passed her, and then hurried down the hallway and towards Aleksander's door.

Halfway there she stopped. Someone was waiting in front of his door, someone clad in corporalki red.

Ivan.

Alina looked at Fedyor who gave her a confused look. She hurried, as panic spread through her chest and seized her throat.

"Ivan," she greeted. "Why are you standing there?"

He had a stack of parchments in his hands, all neatly rolled, and as she approached he straightened and tried to smooth his expression, but his eyes seemed worried.

"*Moya sovereny*," Ivan greeted. "The General is not responding -"

Alina frowned. "Why don't you enter? I'm sure he didn't lock -"

"The door rule," Fedyor said. "If it's open, anyone can come in, no knocking, or invitation. If it's closed you need to knock and wait for the invite."

"Oh," Alina said. "Well he must be in there because -" Alina was saying to Fedyor, and then turned to Ivan. "Wait. Can you... can you hear ...?"

"Yes," Ivan said. "He is in there. But he is not responding -"

Alina could feel it. If Ivan was worried -

"Well, I don't need an invite, do I," she said, and grabbed the door handle. The door gave in, the familiar creak of wood as it moved to the side. Alina entered and two heartrenders followed. The War Room was empty. Perhaps he was asleep? She walked towards the bedroom door, which was wide open - the bed looked intact and Alina sighed. "He's not here," she turned to two men following her.

"His study," Fedyor said, and they hurried, and Alina with them.

The door to his study was halfway open. It was Ivan who reached it first, pushing it, and all of them saw - Aleksander, fallen over all the papers, reports and treaties on his desk, seemingly unconscious.

Alina wasn't really aware of shouting his name or moving - but somehow she pushed past Ivan and she was there, next to Aleksander in an instant. She tried to shake him, and even through the fabric of his kefta she felt he was burning up.

"General?" Ivan called, and both he and Fedyor were next to her instantly. Alina touched his forehead - it was unbearably hot. She looked at Ivan.

"Healer! Go find a Healer, now!"

Ivan ran - he actually ran out of the room. Alina tried to push Aleksander up, tried to shake him, called his name, but all she got for a response were incoherent mumbles.

"Fedyor, help me," she said, and Fedyor did manage to sit him up against his chair. "Aleksander? *Aleksander*?" she realized her tone was all panic and urgency as Aleksander opened his eyes, just slightly and his head lolled to the side.

“Alya -” he managed. “‘tis not good -”

“I can see that,” she said, tugging at his kefta. “We need to take this off. You need to cool down,” she was saying, remembering Ana Kuya and her orders whenever one of the children had fever. Cool down, bring the fever down. Alina looked at Fedyor and he nodded. “We have to,” Alina repeated for Aleksander’s sake, but his movements were so sluggish and uncontrolled, that he had no real strength to object. Fedyor pulled at the collar of the kefta, to get it off his shoulders and Aleksander almost fell forward. Alina caught him, a significant part of his weight resting against her abdomen, as his right arm encircled her whole.

“msorry *milaya*,” he said, trying to cooperate, his face falling against Alina’s sternum. Fedyor managed to pull the kefta off him.

“Can you stand?” Alina asked, offering her hand and trying to help him up. It didn’t work and Fedyor stepped in - and at that moment Ivan returned. Two men half pulled Aleksander to his bedroom, setting him on the covers. Alina moved to his feet, thinking how his boots had to feel uncomfortable. She managed to pull one off when something occurred to her. She turned to Fedyor and Ivan. “Did you both have it?”

“Have what?” Ivan asked.

“*Vetryanaya ospa*,” Alina said. “The pox?”

“I did,” Fedyor said immediately. “I remember it -”

However Ivan just stared at them.

“Ivan??”

The grim, fierce heartrender was looking between Alina and Fedyor, shaking his head. “I do not remember. But why -”

“You cannot be here,” Alina said, not bothering with the protocol or how to address Aleksander’s guard who now somewhat tolerated her. He was still a person, and his health was important. Alina stepped close as Ivan watched, dumbfounded. “You cannot be here, it’s extremely contagious, it’s very dangerous, and I cannot risk you -”

“But -”

“Ivan, no arguing,” Alina spoke, taking his forearm and pushing. “You are the General’s second in command and we cannot risk your health and your life. You get out of here, now!”

“Ivan, listen to her,” Fedyor asked softly. For just a moment longer Ivan resisted, gave one long look to Alina and nodded.

“As moya soverenyia commands,” he said and hurried out.

*

Sonya arrived with two other healers within minutes. They demanded that Fedyor and Alina leave, but Alina refused. “I am his wife,” she heard herself saying over the fear that gripped her throat tight. She watched them work, barely understanding what they were saying, placing hands on Aleksander, giving him some kind of a medicine to drink, taking off his undershirt and pants - which left him in his breeches only - and offering to take turns in watching over him.

“No,” Alina was firm. “I will stay here with him. If anything happens -”

“Have you ever taken care of an ill man before?” Sonya was asking, serious. “He is an adult Grisha, at the height of his power. By all means he should not be sick at all -”

“I know that,” Alina said. “How is this even possible? For him to get... this ill?”

Sonya pressed her lips together. “It is extremely uncommon but not impossible. Our bodies are strengthened by our power, but they’re not indestructible. The fatigue, the hardship, worries... It takes a toll and sometimes makes us unable to fight back a disease. The General -” Sonya paused, giving Alina an uncertain look.

“Please continue,” Alina demanded. Whatever they were not telling her, could not remain unspoken now. If Alina had the right to bed her husband as she pleased, then she had the right to be fully and truthfully briefed about his health.

“The peace treaty,” Sonya was saying. “The General worked himself into the ground for weeks. And after you arrived, he continued to do so.”

Alina stared. *Your lonely husband*, Genya had said. And how he always worked, how he seemed so tired so often, how he looked subdued, unwilling to fight with her... Hardship and worries? And how he told her that he was *certain* she would refuse to even see the rooms he was preparing for her?

“I understand,” she said, and she did, the realization twisting sharply in her chest. “Please, tell me what I need to do.”

*

After Sonya and other healers left, Alina opened the windows and let the air into the room, checked Aleksander's forehead- it was significantly cooler and he was asleep, but he was still warm and seemed restless on the big bed. She needed a washcloth and a bowl, she needed water for him to drink, as Sonya advised - if he is awake then let him drink slowly, and if not, to put the wet washcloth over his mouth and keep his lips moist.

Half an hour later he started to shake, as his fever rose again. Sonya had warned her it would happen, and told her to cover him with a sheet only. Alina did so, calling for lunch, and arranging a big, soft chair near his bed. She ate there, a tray on her lap; she offered him food, but he could not eat. He couldn't even wake properly.

Alina needed to delegate her obligations. She called for Genya, she called for Fedyor and arranged everything with them, postponing a meeting and trusting Geyna with tomorrow's menu.

"Try to rest," Geyna said.

The evening neared and Aleksander seemed to breathe more easily. Alina checked his temperature, Sonya came to check on him and told her that he was doing as well as it was expected.

"Go and take a walk," Sonya told her. "I will be here for a little while, and you could use some fresh air."

Alina agreed, spending about twenty minutes on the outside. She stopped by the library and picked out a book, heading back for Aleksander's rooms. Back in his bedroom, she pulled a thin coverlet over him as the air was getting colder, carefully inspecting the red dots covering his chest, his neck, his face.

"Please, get well," she said, taking her seat next to him, opening the book she brought in a valiant attempt to read, but to no avail - after each two lines she would look up and watch him, listening to his labored breath in the night.

Chapter End Notes

Few notes, after you've read this chapter.

Vetryanaya ospa, or varicelle is chickenpox; a disease that's usually harmless for children who mostly handle it well, but if contracted in adult age, it tends to kick your ass and land you in bed for solid two weeks with fever, fatigue, rash, itch and even pneumonia. It can even kill you, if you happen to have some kind of an underlying health condition.

Why chickenpox? You can thank my son who had it a month and a half ago. :D

We know from book canon that Grisha don't get sick thanks to their powers. Well, we're ignoring book canon here, in order to make things more human, right? Right. So my theory is that Grisha are more resilient than ordinary people, but they're not all powerful and they're not immune to all diseases, especially when they're tired, exhausted and under huge emotional stress (which should tell you a few things about how exactly Aleksander is doing at this point).

Finally, I hope you don't yell too hard at for stopping where I did - I fully wanted to see them through this disease, but this was simply too intense to handle in one chapter.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. here's the new chapter - which was pretty intense to work on, and also a fine line to walk. I'm excited to share it, in fact my excitement for this story grows as we move forward and as Aleksander and Alina's relationship changes. I hope you'll enjoy it, and if you do, please say so. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina still had the scar on her left palm. It was pale, a thin crescent moon on her skin. There was a round scar on the back of Aleksander's right hand - a full eclipse, the darkening of the light. If she put her scar against his own, they might have aligned. Maybe not perfectly, but the symmetry was there, the correlation to their lives - hers of a half Shu, orphan outcast, and his, as an unnatural boy, a thing with frightening powers.

Alina woke up, disoriented and sore, the book falling from her lap. It took a moment until the world around her came into focus - a night lamp near Aleksander's bed and him, lying restlessly, his face covered with sweat. His eyebrows knitting together, his expression painful, eyes closed; his mind clouded by fever. Alina stood, neared the bed and touched his forehead - he was burning up, his skin clammy and hot, his lips moving without a sound.

"Oh Saints," she said, looking around - it was pitch black outside.

She could send for a healer - but Sonya and everyone else, who worked around the clock in the Palace and the refugee settlement as well, needed their rest. She made a decision, to try to help him first by herself. She had claimed that task after all, and him. It wasn't the responsibility that felt so heavy on her, but the outcome that seemed more uncertain by the minute. What if he didn't make it? Ever since she joined her hands with him on the battlefield she never thought of something like this, counting on him to be here. She had to consider now that one moment she might wake up into a world without him - and the thought wasn't what she would expect it would be. It wasn't a prospect of freedom, but a terrifying unknown.

There was a bowl of water and a washcloth on his nightstand, one she had used several times throughout the day to refresh his face and moisten his lips. She pressed it against his forehead, cool and wet - he let out a painful sound, the water and the cold were unbearably painful against his skin.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "But I have to. Your fever is high, too high. We have to bring it down -"

He tried to speak, his voice coming out in incoherent mumbles. Alina listened, trying to make sense of his half words. She bit her lip and pressed the washcloth against his face, his neck, his shoulder blades, until he settled a little bit. She noticed the silver ring on his hand, realizing nobody had thought of it, or how he could cut himself if he waved his hand or lied on it.

Here she was, gently pulling it off his finger, trying not to startle him or hurt him, not to aggravate his state, touching him to check how high his fever was, when not so long ago she stabbed him with a knife and let Mal throw him into the darkness of the Fold. Where was that anger that pounded in her chest then? The conviction that he had to die? The indignation, the refusal of the union he tied her to and ended the conflict with West Ravka? *He is weak and you can free yourself now*, she heard a voice, not unlike Mal's and recoiled from the thought, imagining Mal asking, *what did he do to you, Alina?*

I cannot harm someone helpless, she thought, reaching for the hand with the scar. *I don't want to, I want to help him*, she thought. *I can hate him plenty when he recovers*. Hating him now seemed unfair, because he needed her. His hair was a mess, slick with sweat and sticking to his forehead, and his body looked thin and weak, nothing like the dark figure from the Fold that seemed to wield unlimited power. He could have all the healers here, but he was overworked and exhausted and lonely, and Alina knew that he needed *her*.

For a short while he seemed at peace, his breathing even. Alina settled back into the chair, staring sadly at him, at his chest crisscrossed with scars and covered in rash, the damage between two of them so vast. She didn't think she would fall asleep but she did, just sitting there, startled awake with the first moan that came from him not long after. He started to cry then, in long, desperate sounds that echoed with fear and grief and begged for help. Alina was next to him in an instant, touching his face, calling his name, pressing the cool cloth against his cheeks, but it was like she wasn't there, like he couldn't even hear or feel her.

"No, no, no... don't kill her. Please don't... don't harm her, please don't, please, please-" Alina stared, frozen as the words tumbled from his lips, weak, helpless, pleading. Was he dreaming? No, she thought, felt, as he frowned and trashed and tears started streaming down his face - it wasn't a dream. He was remembering, he was trapped in the past. He cried out again, a sound that could cut through the iciest heart. "Luda... no, no, no, please, Please help her, no..."

"Aleksander," Alina took his right hand, pressing it against herself, his scars covered by her hands. "Aleksander, please, you're safe, you're here. Sasha -"

"Just mortal..." he mumbled, starting to cry again, wailing and desperate sounds filling the room. Alina kept calling him, scared, helpless and useless. "Just mortal, just mortal..." he kept saying, sobbing like he would never stop. Alina couldn't see him well, her eyes prickling, her sight blurry, until she wiped her tears and swallowed her sobs. He was desperate and helpless, and maybe even dying, he needed her and she - she needed him.

"Please Sasha, please..." she said, paused, wishing she could somehow reach him, pull him out of the nightmare of his memory- realizing that there was her power underneath his hand, and his underneath her fingers. She closed her eyes, wishing she could call him back, give him her own strength. Just like he did to her, back when this started, when he walked from the battlefield with her, from the signed treaties and towards the dark. She felt the tug of his shadows to what seemed like an abyss, frightening and all encompassing world of depthless darkness, and for a moment she wondered if she followed would she ever come back up. But then he cried, and she let herself go.

The connection was there, vibrant, strong, alive. Alina pulled at her light and his shadows, wishing she could give him her strength, chase the fever away. He stopped crying, he seemed better, breathing less labored when he whispered "Alya". And when he relaxed, she let go.

She pulled her chair completely next to him, her hand on his chest because she wasn't a heartrender and she couldn't hear his heartbeat. She needed it against her palm, to know he was still alive.

*

Alina woke, her neck painful and stiff, her mind in a haze. She saw the healers, their red keftas all gathered around Aleksander's bed - she couldn't see him, she couldn't feel him, there was no heartbeat against her palm; all she heard was her own heart hammering in her chest. Why would they push her away from him? Did his heart stop, did his breath cease, was he lost to her? She got up and stumbled, someone catching her, and only then she realized Genya was there as well.

"It's okay, they need to see how he's doing, they need to wash him -"

"No," it wasn't even that her mind could fully form an argument behind that protest. It was just that she felt she should be doing it. "No," she said again, looking at Sonya and three young healers she didn't even know. Aleksnader probably knew them, but he wasn't himself right now, he was helpless to state his own preference. It dawned on her that she had to make this call, because just as she was his, something she recoiled from in the beginning, he was *hers*. And she had a say. "I will do it, and Sonya," she looked at Genya then. *I am his wife* remained unsaid this time, and it wasn't necessary to repeat, but she thought it, felt it.

"I'll stay too, if you want," Genya offered and Alina felt gratitude because she didn't have to ask. Young healers nodded and left, because that was what Lady Kirigan wished. Alina felt Genya's hand squeeze her shoulder as she looked at Sonya. Being sick meant losing dignity, depending on others Alina didn't want unknown healers stripping Aleksander to his skin while he was so helpless.

"What do I do?" Alina asked Sonya. She'd let the healer have the last say because Alina still needed guidance.

"Let's try waking him up first, try to get him to sit up. He needs fresh linens and covers, and we have them here. We can change the bed, but you'll have to help him stand, or we'll sit him in the chair. That's how we'll wash him, just to freshen him up. It will be easier to reach his back and he will feel less terrible about it. It's uncomfortable and I understand why you want to do it yourself."

Alina took Aleksander's hand in hers and touched his cheek with the other. She held his fingers against her chest and called his name. It took a few moments but he opened his eyes, his dark gaze unfocused.

"Milaya," he managed, his voice raspy and strained, overwhelming relief flooding her.

"It's me," she said. "Could you sit up for me? I will help you. You need to freshen up a bit," she was saying, coaxing, willing him to work with her. There was no protest from him, even if she expected him to put in some resistance and say just to leave him be. He listened to everything she said, allowed her to pull him up, and she managed it despite him being taller and heavier. He leaned against her, his skin still too warm and held onto her when Sonya gave her a fresh washcloth. The feeling of being gently patted and wiped still seemed to disagree with his fever, but despite being uncomfortable, as much as she could tell, he didn't ask her to stop. He endured it, shaking lightly, nothing of the imposing Black General left in the man she was touching. He was familiar and yet still a stranger, his body so unknown to her. Maybe she could know him, maybe there was some way for them to coexist, only if he could defeat the illness shaking him. But she couldn't be thinking about that, she couldn't be giving up, he needed to stand so that his bed could be changed and sweaty sheets brought away. "Come on," she whispered, "let's get you up. Can you do that? Can you hold onto me?" he was nodding, his hands on her shoulders, his face near hers. She had to hold him, her arms completely around him so that he could get on his feet.

"Alina -"

"I'm here," she was saying near his chest, feeling his heart as it raced against the exhaustion, and she held him, minutes feeling so long, because she feared his legs would give out. Maybe more people would have been quicker, maybe changing bed linens was not something that Genya and Sonya were supposed to do, but she couldn't be bothered with it all. She wanted Aleksander to feel safe, to ease his discomfort, and not allow such intimate care to someone unfamiliar.

"All done," Genya said quietly. Alina guided him to sit, asking Genya to help hold him up.

"I need to change these," Alina willed the confidence she didn't possess into her voice as she knelt next to the bed and reached for his breeches. He nodded, his hands at the edge of the mattress. Alina remembered how carefully she was treated in his tent, how he arranged it all so that she would feel the least discomfort possible. He wasn't there to see her bathe, knowing that she would have been uncomfortable, that it would be an invasion of her privacy. Wasn't this the same thing then, was she about to breach his privacy, and what he would prefer, her or young healers, his subordinates, doing this?

"'tis okay, *milaya*," he said, as if he could sense her thoughts. It was just a body, she was telling herself, it was just him, and he needed her to take care of him. She was in the army, she had seen everything that there was to see, she wasn't a blushing, virgin bride at all. And if she didn't end up with the First Army she might have become a maid to some old man, and would be doing this, only not for her husband.

Her fantasies of undressing him were never like this. Alina pushed them all aside, pulling at the gauzy fabric, still damp with sweat. There was nothing about his nakedness that should have made her uncomfortable, but she couldn't but notice how beautiful he was. She wiped his skin and patted him dry, and then dressed him clean. "Good, you were so good," she soothed as he was finally able to lay down, and for a moment Aleksander reached for her hand.

"Thank you," he said, his hand weakly holding onto hers.

"Let me take a look at him now," Sonya said. Reluctantly, Alina let him go.

"You should take a bath yourself," Genya said. "Come on. Come on, we shall be just next door."

Alina let Genya take her and for a moment she almost didn't realize where she was. The room seemed new, everything in elegant oakwood, beige linens, golden cushions on the wide bed. It was another bedroom, comfortable and airy and full of light, and Alina realized it was *hers*. Something he hoped she would enjoy, and he had been right.

"Come," Genya said, taking Alina to a bathing chamber that was just as exquisite as the bedroom. The tub filled with water awaited, the entire room sunny and warm - just the way Alina liked.

He wanted to show it to her.

Was everything with them deemed to go backwards?

"I can help you," Genya offered but Alina just shook her head.

"I can manage on my own," she said.

"I would still like to help you," Genya said. "What you've been doing is hard enough."

"Still, you are not my maid," Alina insisted.

"I know. I am offering. You've been on your own, with someone who is very sick for hours. You deserve someone taking care of you. And you know he would agree with me."

Alina gave in, letting herself into Genya's care.

Half an hour later she felt refreshed and somewhat more awake. She went back to Aleksander, whose breakfast tray lay intact on his nightstand, the tea and small pancakes getting cold.

"You should eat," she said, pulling her chair close. He was propped on two pillows, dozing off.

"Not hungry," he whined, when she offered him the small, round pancake.

"But you need it," she was saying, the food still offered. He relented, looking at her as he ate.

"I'm so sorry, Alina," he said as she offered him tea. "I never meant to be such... burden."

"You're not a burden," she said, and she meant it.

"You're stuck with me here. I'm disgusting and sweaty and I stink -"

"Well, not any more," she made sure to smile, to let him see she was joking.

"Ha. True. Thank you for the bath."

"That was not a bath," she offered another pancake, this one topped with berry jam. "But maybe tomorrow you can get a real bath."

"I hope," he took a bite. A little bit of jam was sticking to his beard, and without much thought she leaned closer to wipe it away. "As I said, disgusting. This thing is... ruining my good manners."

"Well then, let's hope they return safely," she said, feeling relief because he looked better. His fever went down after Sonya treated him, he was eating and having a conversation. She wanted to believe that he was out of the woods, but she knew that the fever could return.

"Did I talk nonsense?"

"You talked," she said, wondering how much to tell him. Should she describe the agony he was in, wouldn't that only make him feel worse? "I don't think it was nonsense."

"Oh?"

"It sounded like you were remembering something distressing," she offered.

"*Oh*," he pressed his lips and looked to the side.

"It's okay. It's... "

"I'm sorry you had to hear all that. Maybe someone else should -"

“Aleksander, no. I... *want* to be here and help you. I don’t need to be impressed, or to think you’re indestructible,” Alina moved the tray to the big table at the other end of the room, coming back with more tea. “If you want we can talk about it later. If you want.”

“What did I say?” He seemed anxious. Alina let him drink a bit more, then set the tea cup aside.

“You were talking about someone named Luda,” Alina said carefully, her voice soft. “I assume whatever happened... wasn’t nice.”

“No,” he said, his voice heavy and soft.

“You cried,” Alina continued, watching as he closed his eyes, take a deep breath. “I couldn’t help you much. You were upset. You said the words *just mortal*”

“Because she was,” his eyes were sad, distant, lost somewhere Alina couldn’t follow. She wanted to ask but, decided not to, letting him choose if he would tell her more. If he wanted to. “She loved me and paid with her life.”

“You don’t have to tell me all that. If it’s so upsetting -”

“Perhaps I *should*,” he countered. “It’s not like I can choose what... what comes out of my mouth when I’m delirious. So you’ll hear, either way.”

“Aleksander,” her voice was sure, deliberate, when she took his hand, his gaze held in hers. “I will gladly listen, but only when you feel you want to tell me. And you will tell me, the way you want to tell me. I don’t want you to do it because you feel forced.”

*

Alina guessed who it was when she heard the loud, deliberate knocking.

She opened the large War Room door and there stood Ivan, doing his best to keep his face stern. Alina thought he seemed nervous.

“*Moya sovereny*,” he sounded awfully formal, he even bowed. Alina wasn’t sure how to feel - he could barely tolerate her presence and she never imagined he would come to her, willingly. “May I inquire how the General is doing?”

“He is asleep right now,” Alina said. “He had a difficult night. How are you doing?”

“Me?”

“Ivan, you helped Fedyor carry him to his bedchamber. I’m... worried about you.”

For a moment Ivan didn’t seem to know what to do with that bit of information. The stern expression relaxed and something shifted in his gaze.

“So far I am feeling fine. I haven’t noticed any sign of --,” he gestured around his face and body. “I think I am healthy.”

“Good. Hopefully you had it as a child.”

“Well... I had two older brothers. So, it’s within the realm of possibility,” Ivan offered. Alina didn’t miss out on the fact that he *had* them.

“I hope you are safe, but I insist on you being cautious. And... I hope you can understand that, and don’t think I am being... a problem.”

“I agree with your reasoning. In fact -” Ivan paused, placing hands behind his back, his stance somewhat less stiff. “I wanted to inform you that, as General’s second in command, I will review the reports arriving today and visit the settlement.”

Alina nodded. “I would like to ask you, when you return, to inform me if anything is missing. If there may be some way I can help. I fear my knowledge will not be useful in reviewing reports.”

“I shall do my duty. May I inquire about the General again?”

Alina gave him a tired smile. He was harsh and perhaps narrow minded, but he was loyal to Aleksander to the point of letting her push him out of the room, because he knew Aleksander would agree.

“Of course you can.”

*

Aleksander slept through most of the day, but still Alina was unwilling to leave him for longer periods of time. What if his fever rose and he was all alone? However she was aware of another thing - by now the entire palace knew he was struck by illness. That alone was bad in itself - he wasn’t supposed to fall ill. Alina supposed that the healers, Ivan, Fedyor or Genya didn’t tell anyone just how badly he was doing. She felt that lack of her presence would only serve to make matters worse and fuel the gossip on his condition. The staff and the other Grisha needed to see a black kefta among them, feel the presence of their General. As much as he was a commanding force, he was also their sense of safety. Alina recalled her relief when the West Ravkans brought her to him on that battlefield. Her mind might have screamed that he was an enemy, everything

else in her knew that being given to him meant she was saved. Alina tasked herself with everything he would have done through the day - visit the classes for the younglings, pass through the palace with Fedoyr at her side, review the staff reports, sign off the supplies.

With the breakfast done and Aleksander peacefully asleep, after Sonya's tonic took care of his fever, Alina asked Genya to tailor all the signs of the previous night off her face.

"That is a wise choice," Genya said, carefully working. Fresh and tidy look, but not overdone, Alina said and Genya nodded, arranging her hair into a shiny, simple updo. "May I suggest that you sleep in an actual bed tonight?"

Alina bit her lip, looking at Genya in the mirror.

"I don't want to leave him alone," Alina said, feeling she's been repeating that same line for ages now. Thinking about what that had meant.

What did he do to you, Alina?

Genya smiled, her expression just a tiny bit wicked.

"Who says you have to? He's taking up only one half of that bed."

*

The day wasn't terribly eventful, and that suited Alina just fine. Every time she was away from Aleksnader's chambers she found herself wishing she could just abandon whatever she was doing and go straight to him. Keeping pretenses was important - it was also called diplomacy, Genya informed. Maybe that was the reason why Ivan joined Fedyor and her as they made rounds during the afternoon, maybe he just wanted to keep an eye on her on behalf of his master - but whatever was the reason, nobody dared whisper as they passed. Alina suddenly realized why Aleksander wanted Ivan to accompany her in the first place. It wouldn't have prevented the gossip, though. Whoever wanted to talk would, after Ivan's back was far, far away. This way she at least had an agreeable company.

The evening came and she was happy to retreat where she wanted to be - with the husband she didn't choose for herself, and now could not, would not leave into care of others. He was dozing, but when she entered his room he woke, the evening sun casting golden rays across his tired face. He looked terribly weak but still beautiful.

"Ah," he said. "There you are. I heard I've gotten a replacement," his words were light, an amused smile slowly stretching his lips. "You're ordering my heartrenders around, I hear."

"I couldn't have imagined someone would keep you so misinformed. Besides, it was for Ivan's own good," Alina said, taking a seat near him. "I called for dinner."

"Ah. Means I will have to eat."

"You might get cake if you behave," Alina told him, remembering how Oleg, the chief cook, mentioned that the General enjoyed madjarica, and that was what he was making today, wishing his sovereign a quick and successful recovery. Had Aleksander been a terrible leader, a horrible and cruel person, the kitchen staff wouldn't bother with making something that would cheer him up, even a little.

"Did you make someone make cake? Or is it just Ivan whom you're bossing around?"

"No, the cake was Oleg's idea," she said, watching Aleksander shift uncomfortably. "What is it?"

"Everything itches. I am not certain which is worse, the fever or the itch."

"Oh Saints, I am so sorry. I should have thought of it before -" Alina was getting up, but his almost disappointed expression stopped her. "Aleksnader?"

"You're going ...away?"

"Just to arrange an oatmeal bath for you," she said and the expression he made was both miserable and comical. "It will soothe the itch," she explained.

"How come you know so much about this?"

"I had the pox when I was about ten years old. I was pretty miserable," Alina explained. "And then later I had to help take care of other sick children. Ana Kuya believed we all needed to earn our food."

"Well then," the amused expression lingered on his face. "I assume I am in good hands then."

Aleksander was able to eat the dinner on his own. As promised, there was cake, and if Alina ever saw him gleeful, it was when she gave him a plate of sweet treats.

"Time for the bath," she said after he ate four little slices, confident that they could manage it without Sonya or anyone else. Aleksander was feeling better than in the morning. Getting him up and taking a walk to his bathchamber took him less effort than holding him upright when Sonya and Genya changed the sheets. Alina still insisted she'd help him undress, she helped him enter the tub, and when he was finally inside, he took a big sigh full of relief.

“This is wonderful,” he stated, submerging himself up to his chin.

“I told you,” Alina said, pacing around and trying not to stare at him. He sighed, looking content and child-like, and her heart did a treacherous misstep at the sight. Perhaps she should have let the healers handle all of this, and this was a mistake, perhaps she was falling into the same trap as before, a foolish girl who wished to belong, to matter, to be wanted. But she couldn’t, she couldn’t be cruel or leave when he was so helpless. The world where struck him with a knife seemed like some completely different place.

When he was done with the bath, she helped him up and out of the tub, brought a large towel and wrapped it around him. He held onto her, thankful look in his eyes.

“You’re taking care of me,” he said, the words so loaded, that she had to wonder when was it last time that someone did.

When was the last time he mattered? Not The Darkling, or the Black General, the heretic and the monster of the Fold - but *Aleksander*. And at the same time, she remembered Baghra saying how he perfected the art of manipulating young girls. But, where was Baghra now, when her son was so ill?

“I am,” she stated simply, realizing what he wasn’t saying. “I will, until you feel beter. until you’re healthy again.”

She helped him to bed and then brought him fresh nightclothes, pulled the cover over him as he lay. He observed her as she walked around his chambers, placing on his nightstand everything that they might need through the night - a bowl filled with water, several washcloths, a bottle with Sonya’s fever tonic. Then she walked around the bed, took a deep breath and untied her velvet robe. She had a nightshift underneath, a wide, comfortable one that covered most of her body. He watched, his gaze part awe, part disbelief as she pulled the cover down and slowly settled down. He turned to his side, so that he would face her, and the light of the night lamp behind him surrounded him like a halo. He didn’t say anything, but he was smiling, a tentative, soft smile and light in his eyes.

Alina told herself that this was okay, that it was normal, and expected and nothing wrong to lay next to Aleksander, and fall asleep to the sound of his breath.

Chapter End Notes

Madjarica is a cake very popular in Croatia, especially in northern and east part of the country. it's basically a simple layered chocolate slice. It's impossible to eat just one.

Being sick and not able to fully take care of yourself is pretty uncomfortable, and truly not fun. It's a situation where your dignity goes out of the window especially if other people have to do some basic things like help you eat or help you get a bath. This chapter was a fine line to walk, because intimacy through illness is not a joyful kind of intimacy that most people wish for. i tried to keep that between the lines. I feel this is already very bad for Aleksander, letting all of the care to someone else, someone not close to him would probably make him feel even worse. So hopefully I did right, and gave Alina more things to think about.

Finally, a huge shout out to Middlemarch! <3 <3 <3 I may serve you tons of new AUs, but your fics make me squeal like nobody else. I stole the madjarica. I hope you don't mind. ;)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the new chapter, which I have written in - I think - record time. This story is a unique experience for me because it's not leaving me alone. I don't have breaks between chapters. I post one and then just keep on writing. And to think that just three months ago I was convinced I would never write anything ever again. Thank you everyone for messages and comments and encouragement, it means so much to me. Please, don't hesitate to comment, it makes me so so happy and it's so good to know that I am not alone in this story, following these two through the complex maze of their relationship, their connection and their marriage.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After three days they settled into a routine. The nights were still the worst part and Alina usually woke several times, sometimes on her own, just to check how Aleksander was doing, and sometimes because she felt him stirring and twisting in discomfort. Sleeping next to him felt comfortable, and better than she would allow herself to admit, always pointing out to herself that she could feel the exact moment when he'd start to stir. That she could react before his fever rose so high that he succumbed to delirious speech. She made a point of not noticing how each time she woke they slept a bit closer to each other, almost touching, as she found herself waking to the sound of his breathing. But that was an unconscious action, she thought as she'd continue to lay beside him before the sun was fully up.

She'd let him sleep through the day, as much as he could, and as much as he would tolerate - as she expected he became bored, which was why she agreed to read some of the reports to him. She knew that he could probably read them on his own, but then she wouldn't be asking questions and making commentary about whatever events she was reading about; about Ivan's wording (*he's about as generous with words as he is with smiles*), and Aleksander wouldn't be bursting into laughter as he listened. If it was unfair to use poor Ivan as a means of their jokes, Alina found it worth each time she made Aleksander laugh.

After the breakfast and Sonya's visit, Aleksander dozed off. (Sonya said she was pleased with how he was holding up, saying that she hoped he would start feeling better soon). Alina moved around the War Room, neatly rolling the parchments still spread all around the table. There was a knock on the door, the familiar fast rap she came to associate with Ivan. Alina dropped the list of supplies she approved and would be leaving at the kitchens. It was too early for Ivan to show up. She glanced through the door to his bedchamber, saw his hands clasped on top of the finely made cover, closed the door and hurried to let Ivan in.

Ivan wasn't alone. Fedyor and Genya were with him.

"The General?" Genya asked.

"Asleep," Alina answered, noticing the glances exchanged among three of them. "What is going on?"

"Ivan, you were there," Genya said. Ivan was standing to her left and Fedyor to her right, their red keftas in contrast to her ivory, meaning that she was at the Grand Palace. Tsaritsa did not enjoy the corporalki red on *her* tailor, Genya told her not long after Alina returned to the Little Palace, a statement filled with layers Alina was beginning to see in a vastly different light now.

"*Moya sovereignty*, I assume you remember the man who tried to rob Vadim and his mother?"

Alina looked sharply at Ivan, and then at Fedyor and Genya. "Of course I remember. What happened?"

"One of our men came early this morning to inform me that the same man had gotten drunk and caused a fight. Two other men are wounded, one of them seriously injured. Stabbed. It appears that the offender was trying to steal yet again. I have him in custody and a healer taking care of injured ones. I was hoping I could discuss this with the General, but -"

"Will the injured men recover?" Alina asked, shifting to look at the bedchamber door.

"Yes, they will," Fedyor supplied.

"We can keep Igor in custody," Ivan continued, "but I am wondering if that should be done, considering what the General said about recurring violence."

Yes, indeed, Alina thought. Aleksander was stern, his words bookering no discussion on the matter of causing violence again. Should they simply keep Igor imprisoned, waiting for Aleksander to get better to assume all of his duties, everyone else would be wondering, justly, what good was General's word worth. Or how ill he was.

"What is the alternative?" Alina asked, straightening. The General was asleep, he was recovering, he needed his time. But the General had a wife, someone who would weigh between duties and his well being.

"Sending him on his way," Ivan answered. "Limited supplies, no help."

"Is that what the General would order?" Alina asked all of them but looked at Genya first.

"Most certainly," she said, turning to the men for affirmation. Both heartrenders nodded.

"Can I make the decision, then?" Alina asked Ivan. "Not because the General couldn't or wouldn't, but because I want to spare him from worrying while he is still not doing well."

Now Ivan looked at the other two.

"It was what you were hoping for, wasn't it?" Genya said with a slight sigh. Ivan pressed his lips and turned to Alina again.

"What does *moya soverenyia* command?," he said, and she wondered if Fedyor spent hours talking him into something like this, if Genya spoke of her, if Aleksander made any remarks or had issued orders. Alina knew Ivan did not value her, she knew he considered her a liability from the moment she put her foot into that carriage. She might have called him cruel if she didn't know the responsibilities of his position, and she did think him cruel, not too long ago. But she had learned.

Alina thought she should weigh the options. That she should consider Aleksander's orders, or how humane it was to send someone away with little means to fend for himself. The weather was still cold, the spring only beginning, the roads still not safe. But if someone was willing to inflict harm, despite the direct warning of a General, to steal and stab and use those who were weaker? Then perhaps he could fend for himself just fine, and his community deserved to be protected from him. She realized that the decision had been made and there was no purpose debating it whatsoever.

"Send him away," Alina said, knowing that she had reached the precipice, that she had stepped over some invisible divide. That there was no going back. And she could see just that, in Genya's and Fedyor's eyes. In Ivan's as well. Something akin to determination, and pride and relief.

"Yes, *moya soverenyia*," Ivan said, with a slight nod that could have been a bow, and hurried out.

"I will go with him," Fedyor informed.

"Make sure everyone knows it was Lady Kirigan's order. General's agreement should be implied," Genya said. Fedyor looked at her, then at Alina.

"I will do my part, do not worry. I must hurry," he said, and with a bow to both ladies, he hurried off.

"That was a good call," Genya said after they left. "A brave call."

"It was a call," Alina said. "We shall see how good it was."

"Whoever thinks ... low of you will have to think twice now."

"Or they will simply say I am becoming as ruthless as my husband," Alina looked away, realizing that was the first time she said it aloud. Her husband. Something that was only part of her thoughts was taking shape in reality. She was allowing it to take shape.

Genya turned to face Alina. "There's a great deal of power that comes with that black kefta," Genya said. "It's yours to *use*, instead of being afraid of it."

"And what does that make me, Genya? A person to be feared -?"

Genya's hands landed softly on Alina's shoulders. "At times, *yes*. Look around you, Alina. What do you think would happen if everyone at the Grand Palace knew how ill the General was? Sonya brought only trusted healers with her, ones we're certain are not spies, and you did right when you sent them away. You showed power then. The word me and Fedyor got out was that his condition was so dangerous for others because the disease can pass from one person to another. If it can infect the great Black General, it could infect anyone else. But nothing was said about his fever or weakness -"

"Because it would put him in danger," Alina finished.

"And all of us with him," Genya said. "You know that."

She did know it.

"You made clear that you are his equal, Alina. That is a weighty statement. I am glad you did it."

*

She came to Aleksander with the reports and a hollow feeling in her chest after Ivan reported back to her. He did his duty flawlessly, as Alina expected he would - Igor was gone, banished for his violence and according to Fedyor, most people back at the refugee settlement let out a joint sigh of relief. Two injured men were recovering, and everyone knew that the person who gave the order was not The Starless Saint, but Sankta Alina. He was the one who gave the warning, but she acted on his word - in the eyes of those people they were one. Two Saints, united front.

She wondered about her own willingness to commit cruelty. But what was her act of burning the maps, if not cruelty to everyone who died on the skiff? When Mal left Aleksander to die she wordlessly agreed to it - wasn't that cruelty, no matter the fact that to her, at that time, it seemed just and right? So what if cruelty was simply another face of justice, depending on your point of vantage?

She sat into the big chair that she came to think of as hers near Aleksander's bed with a heart so heavy that she almost failed to notice he was not asleep at all. He smiled and she failed to smile in return as she usually did these days.

"Alina? Something happened," he said, pushing himself up until he was sitting. Alina moved close to arrange pillows behind his back, still worried about his recovery, aware of his searching gaze as she pattered around him. "Linochka," he said, his voice gentle on every syllable. She thought how unfitting it was, to soften her name so, after what she just did. When she didn't answer - when she didn't know how to begin, he prodded again. "Milaya? Tell me, please."

Alina sat back on her chair and let herself sink back into its softness. She didn't want to give him a reason to worry. He needed his energy elsewhere. She pulled herself upright, bringing her feet up onto the chair to hug her knees and met his gaze.

"I did something," she said. Confessed. She told him everything and he listened, his expression carefully guarded, his eyes following every gesture of her hand. "I did right," she said, convincing herself.

"That's true," he said, something like tension in his voice, some urgency that felt familiar. Excitement he was trying to suspend. "You did the right thing."

"Yet I feel terrible," she told him, watching as he shifted. She realized why his gaze seemed so familiar. *It means a lot to me, Alina*, he had told her, and she could hear his next words, his exact tone in her mind. *You mean a lot to everyone*, his every word punctuated, his expression guarded, all of his intensity hidden in his eyes.

"I know," he said. "I wish you didn't have to do this. I'm glad you did it. Not reacting would be showing a weakness, this way you made clear that rules we set here are meant to be respected. But not only that, you protected many -"

"By banishing one?" she finished. "So it seems I ... learned from you."

"You considered the entire situation and made a choice. As a war commander would."

"Did you make many choices like this?" she asked before she could stop herself, wishing he would put the guard down, wishing he would be open with her. She got up from her chair and crossed the distance to the bed, taking a seat next to him. He watched as she did so.

"I did. The list is endless. Sometimes I wished to do what was right and ended up doing wrong. Sometimes I was misinformed. Sometimes I would act on impulse and good wishes... then I learned. Learned how to weigh every outcome and choose the one least costly," he moved to sit next to her, dressed in a soft nightshirt and breeches, his feet bare. "It was a painful process. It's always a hard decision."

"Well, I banished someone," she said. "And... there wasn't all that much to think about. I thought - he would hurt someone else, if given a chance. In fact I didn't even think about it. When Ivan told me what had happened.."

She got up and walked to the window, and Aleksander followed her, standing close, so close that she could have leaned into him. He waited for her to finish, and she could feel his closeness almost like a touch, his shape, his figure, the rhythm of his breathing now familiar like the back of her hand. " - I just did it."

He placed a hand on her shoulder, carefully, and she felt the buzz of her power, she felt the soothing presence of his shadows. "And you did what was right," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

"It's still terrible," she pressed, and then she did lean into him, trusted him to support a bit of her weight. His palm slid from her shoulder to her bicep, his hold completely familiar, his chin near the top of her head. Alina thought how intimately that felt, how his thumb stroked along the fabric of her kefta, the black that was his, the black that she had claimed.

"Sometimes you do the right thing and it still feels terrible. And you cannot help it or make it better, and you know this. It still hurts. And such is life," he said, and it was so simple, yet so painful. The connection between them was alive, vibrant, just *there*, feeling somehow more colorful than it did through the past couple of days. She had a sense of comfort, of him wanting to give her that comfort, but also, a sense of pride coming from him like a warm blanket around the chill of her thoughts. "You could have delegated this completely to Ivan and he would have probably done the same. You could have waited until I wrote a note or could make the decision. But you took it upon yourself, and I know it was hard," he brought his other hand up, and now he was holding her, secure enough for her to feel safe, light enough to allow her to move away if she did not want it.

A weak little voice said that maybe she shouldn't. That she shouldn't give in to his logic, his assurances, his excuses, because what she did was not good.

But then, even without applying his logic to this entire situation she knew it was necessary, just like removing an insubordinate soldier from a unit was necessary.

Which meant he was right, and the nagging voice inside her was wrong, guiltling her unjustly for choosing the best option among not very good options.

Slowly, she lifted her right hand to touch his fingers that rested on her left shoulder. She leaned back a little more, and he pulled her closer, just slightly, and then her back was completely against his front, his body pleasantly warm. And then he leaned his cheek against the top of her head and Alina wondered when was the last time someone held her and she felt at peace?

"Come on," he said. "We could call for tea. *Someone* told me yesterday there would be walnut rolls with it," he said and she could hear a smile in his voice.

"Walnut roll. That would be nice," she said, but stayed just where she was for a little while longer.

*

The walnut roll was as delicious as it sounded, freshly baked and soft, covered with powdered sugar. Alina watched as Aleksnader ate two slices after they'd just had lunch. She watched then as he lowered himself on his pillows, closed his eyes and fell asleep. She could have stayed there just to watch him sleep, but the tray needed to be taken care of, and she didn't want to face the implications of sitting on the edge of his bed, just so she could observe his serene face. She could have called a servant, but instead she opted to walk and go to the kitchens herself. If Oleg was there she would make sure to tell him how much the General appreciated being treated with something sweet each day.

The kitchens were quiet and Oleg was not around, but she did find Fedyor and Ivan sharing some strongly scented drink at the table in the corner. A couple more corporalki were there, looking for a bit of food or tea, and they all greeted her politely, even cordially. Fedyor waved.

"Come and join us," he said, and as she approached Ivan nodded even though his expression was solemn and serious.

"You're sure?"

"Of course. Genya and David should be here soon," Fedyor said, looking at Ivan then. "My dearest," he said to Ivan, "I think I am giving up on this and switching to tea. For the foreseeable future," he pushed a cup of dark liquid aside.

"What is that?" Alina asked, not certain what the drink in question was.

"It's called coffee. Very popular in Kerch," Ivan explained. "Would you like to try it?"

"Are you honestly going to offer this dreadful excuse for a beverage to our lady Kirigan?" Fedyor asked, and if Alina did not know him better, she would've thought he was being serious. "Moya soverenya. All he is trying to do lately is convert more people to this hideous beverage."

"Fedya, this is a betrayal of the highest order. You wound me," Ivan was saying with equal seriousness as he got up to find another cup for Alina, walked to the stove, poured the same dark liquid from a pot, and brought it to her. "It's slightly bitter," he said.

"More like, disastrous," Fedyor added. Alina watched them, amused, and took a tentative sip. Just as Ivan described, the aroma was lightly bitter, but still pleasant, and the drink made her feel warm inside.

"It seems that Lady Kirigan rather enjoys it," Ivan observed. Fedyor shook his head with slight exaggeration.

"I *do not* believe this," he sighed, bringing himself a cup of tea and a plate filled with pastries, pretending to offer them to Alina, but not to Ivan. "Oh no, you do not get any."

Alina took another sip. The drink had some wonderful invigorating properties, and she felt her mood improve, and felt herself relax. She had heard the stories about Aleksnader sitting on the floor and eating with his soldiers. She was not a general, but Ivan and Fedyor were her men, her soldiers in all of this, as much as they were Aleksnaders, and they welcomed her as their own. And that felt good, reminding her of her first days here, of Nadya and Marie who dragged her with them, teased each other and laughed. Of everyone who made sure Alina would feel at home.

*

It was time for dinner, and after that, Sonya's evening visit to Aleksander, his bath and then sleep. Which meant leaving one small lamp on and trying not to scoot too close as Aleksander told her one amusing story about Ravkan history or another. Alina went to the Vezda suite to gather her belongings for the night and a fresh change of clothes for the morning, her kefta carefully folded over her arm. Sometimes she would comb and braid her hair by herself, this evening she had Genya's company. She fell silent as Genya worked on her hair, smiling at the memories of the day - Fedyor and Ivan and coffee, Fedyor and Genya gently teasing David. Aleksander and his cheek against the top of her head, his quiet words soothing her.

"That is a lovely smile," Genya said, a mischievous glint in her eye. Alina found her reflection, giving her a pointed look through the mirror. "I did not say anything besides mentioning a lovely smile."

"But you were thinking about it," Alina said.

"Oh, not only a Sun Summoner but a reader of thoughts as well?" Genya's grin turned cheeky. Alina grabbed a hairpin and threw it at her, without any real intention of actually hitting her. They both laughed and Alina felt relaxed, finding that she was able to enjoy Genya's company the way she used to *before*. "In all seriousness, you look content," She added after their laughter ceased. "Is he feeling better?"

Alina felt herself blush - the question was harmless but it brought images of Aleksander asleep, looking soft against his pillows as she sat and tired to read the book on Grisha theory, of him wearing only his nightclothes - or wearing nothing as he carefully entered his tub and she was offering her hand to support him. Aleksnader, asleep next to her, his face nearly buried in her hair, his arms so close, that all she had to do was reach out.

"Yes, he is," Alina said. "And... I am glad. I am relieved."

"I am glad for you," Genya said quietly, carefully braiding Alina's hair. "You deserve to be content, and should you choose, to be happy as well."

"And you think... I could be happy like this?"

Genya's hands were still.

“Yes, I do,” she said firmly, gently, then slowly resumed her work.

“What makes you think so?”

Genya’s hands finished arranging Alina’s hair for the night. She was sitting in her nightshift, her cheeks scrubbed and fresh, surrounded with everything she enjoyed, while a part of her still thought she should not have. Another treacherous part ached to cross the long hallway and enter the War Room, find her Black General, her husband, engrossed in reports someone snuck in for him to review. To chide him because he should have been resting and him complaining that all he was doing was resting.

“Do you think you would be here, talking to me, if he was in his rooms, trashing and hallucinating in fever?” Genya asked, and Alina didn’t have to answer - not to Genya and not to herself. She looked at the reflection in the mirror, learning to recognize what she saw in there.

All she needed, all she wanted to do was leave these rooms and go to him.

Chapter End Notes

A walnut roll is a traditional Croatian cake. It's usually made for Christmas, Easter and similar occasions, but some people enjoy to make it each Sunday. One slice is usually enough :)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

This chapter is one part angst, two parts fluff, which I hope is to everyone's liking. As always I'm so excited to share how much these two fools in love have progressed on their path back to each other. No cake this time, I'm afraid, but I have few other similarly sweet things up my sleeve.

Please let me know if you liked!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina found the War Room bathed in the glow of lamps, and Aleksander at the center of it - in his black robe, standing near his war table, the maps and reports strewn over it. His eyes distant even though aimed at the tiny mountains and soldiers, with his right palm turned over, a delicate whiff of shadow dancing along his fingertips. It was a familiar and aching sight.

"You're up," she said.

His fingers closed and the shadow drifted into nothingness. "Is that not taking your strength?"

"On the contrary," he grinned a little, obviously pleased that he was on his feet and dressed, and with neatly combed hair, despite the late hour. It had to feel like a personal victory, to finally be up. "I cannot stay in bed forever like a frail old man. And summoning will help me get better. Which you should know -," he stopped himself.

She did know, and she set the thought of herself aside, her summoning and lack thereof a smaller matter in face of his illness. "You can say it," she paused, nearing the table but keeping some space between them still. "When I first came here, when you brought me here," she was able to say it without hurt, filling her entire soul, even if there was still a significant tug of awareness of the past and the pain that came with it.

"When you started to summon, you flourished," he said. It was the truth. Her body filled out, her appearance turning healthy and strong. She had regular meals and an appetite now, just as she did then but something was still missing. "Did you perhaps try -?"

She shook her head. Was her sole focus for the past couple of days too obvious? He crossed the distance to her, moving with the familiar economic grace.

"You're feeling better," She said, a statement not a guess, because she could easily see it in the way he held himself. She felt relief weighed down by something she wasn't entirely ready to face. He neared her, almost intimately close, offering his hand, and she could still pretend that he needed her, that he was harmless and soft, merely human while he was like this, dressed in clothes meant to comfort, not conceal.

She hesitated just for a moment, thinking of what Genya would say, Genya and not Mal, because Genya would remind her to put herself first. Aleksander had such long fingers, they enveloped her entire hand and when his power offered itself to her, she took it. The light in her woke up and rushed to meet him. She opened her other hand and instead of the precise movement she had learned she just let the light spill from her fingertips. It was as easy as breathing.

Aleksander watched her, all the concealed excitement suspended in one held breath, and his expression was something she couldn't bear to look at - not yet. She focused on the light, of how it warmed her, from her fingertips through her entire body, how joyous it felt to see it again, the warm thread of *her*. If he was willing to give her this, to afford her an opportunity to claim a bit of herself back, then she would take it.

As good as it felt, she couldn't rely solely upon this, no matter how willing he would be, or how pure his intentions were, or not. The Aleksander she knew and one she remembered bore resemblance, but she was constantly looking for the cracks in what she imagined was deceit. She was looking for the man who was calculated and decisive and cruel enough not to let her leave his grasp, the one who had a collar of antlers pushed into her skin, the one who took her power to make a threat. How was that the same man who gently coaxed the light to the surface, who smiled at her light coming forth? The same man who held onto her when he couldn't stand on his own?

"You're an amplifier," she said, making herself look into his eyes. She could feel him flinch, she could feel a flash of fear in him, but he didn't pull his hand away.

"My mother told you," he said slowly.

"Yes. She did," Alina said, keeping her hand in his. "I don't understand this. I don't understand what is happening to me."

"What is it that you don't understand?"

Alina closed her hand, extinguished the light. Without much thought she walked to his bedchamber and sat on the edge of the mattress, the place where they were just them - not Shadow and Sun Summoner, not the Darkling and Sankta Alina. Aleksander followed, leaving her a bit of space, letting her find comfort in toeing off her slippers to lift her feet and hug her knees. His room was half dark, illuminated by the light coming in through the door.

"I already have an amplifier," she said. The antlers were a part of her now, the stag's bones fused with her own, but the combined power of her light and the stag was now... gone. "I thought that the purpose of it was to make your own power stronger. More expandable, more forceful -"

“Correct,” he said, shadows adding sharp edges to his face. “You experienced it.”

“I defeated you,” she said, just to feel the taste of those words. To see how he would react, and if the surface would crack, revealing a monster she had imagined him to be. But nothing happened, he watched her with equal calm and focus just as a heartbeat before.

“You did. Which means you are at least as strong as I am.”

Alina nearly laughed, mirthlessly, knowing how weighty that statement was and yet not able to feel even a bit of it.

“Okay... if all that is true -,” she lowered her face so that her nose was hidden between her knees, feeling like a lonely girl in an overcrowded room in the Keramzsin orphanage, with nothing but a cot to sleep on, a single slice of the world that was hers, yet didn’t belong to her. “If that is true, if you are right, if you are truthful,” she paused, “then why do I feel like it’s gone?”

“Is it?” He placed a hand on her knee, his fingers splaying over the fabric of her shift and her dressing gown, and just like that it was back, all of it. “I cannot amplify something that isn’t there,” he said.

“And Merzost?” she blurted, realizing that it was weighing on her mind without even being aware.

She thought he would close off, but he didn’t.

“Merzost is something different... but Merzost too needs something to lean into.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you call the light, you call for what already is there, what already exists in the world around you. You can control it in the most precise manner. When you *invoke* Merzost, you let it inside to feed on what already exists in you. Or rather, you let what’s inside get out. And then it takes a shape you cannot control. When you use Merzost you give up control.”

Alina breathed, letting the implications of his words settle. She still remembered that dream, the pain and the hollow, hopeless feeling that seized her when the darkness spilled forth. From him, not from her. If Merzost fed on what was already inside of him, then how much pain, how much sorrow and grief and fear had to be in the body of just one man, to create something so dreadful as The Fold?

“You make it sound like it’s just another manner of summoning,” she said, thinking of what Baghra told her. He was waiting for you, not to destroy the Fold, but to expand it. “Like it’s not even evil -”

“It’s not evil in itself. But in what it does, how it does it... it takes the bad in you and makes it worse. It’s not the knife that’s evil, but stabbing someone that is,” he said, looking drawn and dark but still earnest.

“Did you know what it would do?”

He shook his head, his gaze now distant.

“No.”

“Was it one of those ill informed choices that you made?”

“No. It was a gamble. And a desperate choice. And desperation is never a good ally.”

“Your ... mother said that you were deceiving me. Manipulating me. How do I know you’re not doing it now?”

He sighed. Not annoyed, not angry, just seeming very tired. “She said? Oh Alina... and who raised me, what do you think?” Bitterness slipped into his voice, and regret, and something a lot like sadness. Loss. “The same woman who thinks she needs to hit her students. Did she hit you?”

“... yes,” she said.

“Did she ever tell you why?” When she didn’t say anything he gave her a sad little smile. “When you’re hit or hurt or in danger... your powers come forth to protect you. It’s an instinct that’s out of awareness.” She nodded following his line of thought, remembering the testers from her childhood. If you were hurt the testing wouldn’t work. If you were already hurt, further pain would be just that, pain. Not a new danger. It would block out anything you had in yourself that could protect you. Aleksander continued. “Instead of coaxing it to the surface, she decided to force it forward. It’s faster. By all means, it’s *easier* .,” he told her, and it didn’t sound false. Baghra was a shadow summoner just like him, but there was one quality she had that he pointedly lacked - the stark, bitter cold you’d expect in pitch darkness. “With training and practice you learn to call your power to you of your own will, at any time you like. Baghra... my *mother* ... she does not know a better way, I fear.”

“Is that how she raised you?” Alina asked because he mentioned the old woman raising him. Was he beat as a child? Was he called a foolish boy? Alina couldn’t begin to imagine what having Baghra as a mother could feel like.

“She raised me to be afraid,” he said. “And I did not want to be. I didn’t want to live in a world of fear. Not me, not other Grisha.” he paused, looking down and then towards the window, and the world outside was already covered with darkness. “That is my heresy, Alina. That. I refused to be hunted. That’s what makes me a heretic. More than anything else.”

“And you decided you would win, no matter the cost?”

That did make him curl in on himself, reminding her of a man who pleaded with her even though she was in his tent, collared and bound to the ground.

"It wasn't just me, paying that cost. You saw what a village of refugees was ready to do to a child. Just for being different," he said, and stood up, starting to pace around. "And that, that was just a small thing, a tiniest fraction of what Grisha suffered for centuries -"

Alina stood too, putting herself in his path. She caught his arm on impulse, the connection between them blooming to life again, all of the hurt and guilt he felt pouring over her like a wave. She was realizing that he wasn't telling her just abstract history read in books. It was something he had seen and witnessed and had to live with, just like she had to live with the faces gone from the skiff after she burned the maps. Just like Marie.

"Aleksander," she said, "Sasha. Let's stop. Let's not take this any further -"

"Okay," he agreed. Breathed. Took the reins of his emotions so he could calm down. "I don't want to fight, *milaya*."

"I'm sorry," she said on impulse because it was her remark that pushed him towards this.

"It is me who should be sorry," he pressed, pulling their connected hands close to his chest. "I *am* sorry -"

"I... know," she told him. Did she? She did, she thought. She could see it, feel it...

"I want to help you," he said.

"I know," she said. She did. She wanted to believe it - she *believed it* while a voice in her screamed that she shouldn't. "Let's... let's have dinner. You need to eat. You need your strength."

"I'm feeling better-"

"I know, I can see. But you're not fully healthy yet. And I don't want you to start pushing yourself again. It's what made you so sick in the first place."

He bowed his head a little, the corners of his lips tugging upward. "I need to listen to you," he said then, his eyes glinting for a moment. Their hands were still joined, and he lifted one, kissing slowly her knuckles. "I will listen to you. My lady. My wife," he added.

All the warning shouts in her head were gone. Despite what anyone could say, all she heard in his words was gentleness, and respect, his anger and his shadows tamed.

*

Two days later, which passed uneventfully and without fever, Sonya had declared Aleksander well enough to take a light walk. She also said he was no longer posing a danger to other people he might get in contact with. The breakfast was gone in record time from his plate. Alina told him twice not to go out alone, to wait for her until she returned, and then she sent Genya to him.

"The Grisha and the servants shouldn't see remains of the rash and red spots on his face, or neck, or his hands," she said. "Just the rash. leave the scars, leave the signs of exhaustion, otherwise we'll have the gossip that the General is trying to hide something at our hands." He might protest, but he would comply.

"My, my," Genya smiled. "How quickly you have learned."

Alina hurried to the kitchens, hoping it was early enough to find either Fedyor or Ivan there - and luckily, she found them both. They were both on their feet the moment she showed up at the door.

"Moya suvereniyia," Fedyor greeted. "Something wrong?"

"No, on the contrary," she said, she even smiled, knowing that Aleksander was probably fully dressed by now, pacing and trying to dodge Genya's efforts to hide signs of illness from his face. "The General is allowed to take a walk outside. I want you to accompany us."

Ivan and Fedyor shared a look.

"Yes, of course," Fedyor replied. Ivan took his cup and finished his coffee on his feet, pulling on his hat, while Fedyor finished his pastry. "We will wait for you in front of the gate."

And wait they did. Alina found Aleksander ready and impatient, trying not to pace around Genya - he probably would have left his rooms at least had Alina not made him promise he would wait for her - and Alina realized that, as small as it seemed, he thought his promise to her was important enough to keep it.

"Can we go?" he asked, almost excited as he offered his arm. She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow because she wanted to feel him, knowing he wasn't above telling her he was feeling fine even if his knees were buckling - but also, she just wanted to hold his arm.

Aleksander regained his old posture, the guard and the poise as they passed the hallways and walked down the staircase to the gate. She was aware of everyone who greeted the General, but along with him was also her, and she was aware of the eyes that observed him, her arm relaxed, him looking at her smiling, and to the world around them they probably never looked more as a husband and a wife.

Their heartrenders awaited outside, and if that crooked expression on Ivan's face was a smile, Alina did not let him know she was aware. Fedyor did smile at her, after his official greeting to his commander, and the smile he gave Alina was saying that he was happy *for her*. And so they

went, with Ivan and Fedyor walking some distance behind.

They walked around the Little Palace, their stroll equal measure of an exercise and a show for this who wondered if General was doing worse than what was said, if he would get better, if his wife was even with him, or was she simply hiding away in her own rooms, happy not to be bothered by his presence. Aleksander wanted to go to the stables, and Alina agreed, content that she did.

"Someday soon I want to go riding," he said.

"You will," Alina assured him, observing his tenderness and affection for his big black stallion. He seemed lost and then turned to look at her.

"Would you go with me?" he asked.

She hesitated for just a moment.

"Of course," she said. And there it was, she thought, another small battle she surrendered - and for what? He smiled, a kind of smile that transformed his face.

On their way back they passed through the gardens, nothing but the green and tiny buds on the plants.

"I hoped there would be blossoms," he said.

"I think it's still too early for that," she observed, watching him as he studied a bush of roses, waiting for their turn to blossom and shine. "Why would you want flowers now?"

He turned to look at her, posture relaxed, hands clasped behind his back. He smiled, and when he didn't answer right away she felt a blush rise, realizing what the answer implied. The heartrenders were far enough not to make out every single word of their conversation, but they would positively hear her heart speeding up and skipping a beat.

"Come on, it's cold," he said, coming near her, nearly just a breath away, and she had to look up, remembering just how *high* he was, to see his eyes. "Your nose is all red."

"My nose?"

"And your cheeks," he added, that sweet smile reaching his eyes. Alina knew that smile. Alina knew what he was seeing on her cheeks. "Perhaps you would enjoy some coffee? I heard a certain heartrender convinced you it's superior to tea."

She took his arm again, playing unaffected, because so many eyes were close, seen and unseen, and because she still was not certain where all of this was headed. Or perhaps, she knew where. She did not know other things - would he ever deceive her again? Would he ever decide to reach a goal despite what she thought and wanted? So far he respected her boundaries, ones she set or ones he imagined she would not want him crossing - but would he continue to do that? Or was she just a foolish young girl once more?

*

That night, when she slipped into bed, his bed, and dimmed the night lamp, she wondered if she should be spending her nights here, now that he was starting to feel better. Was she starting to feel too comfortable around him, too used to his closeness? And then, as he settled next to her, sighing, because he was obviously tired after starting to move around and sit for longer periods of time, Alina wondered what she was holding onto, and why? She was married to him, she had resigned herself to what she thought would be a life in a gilded cage, her will crushed, and her personal power of any kind governed and controlled by him.

Instead he was expecting the roses to bloom before their time, so he could pick them for her, but as much as that made her heart race and her mind wander to the past moments, before she knew what he was, she wondered if one excluded the other.

Next to her, Aleksander turned on his side so he would be facing her.

"I have a proposition for you," he said, voice quiet and soft and almost completely innocent in tone.

Alina's throat went tight. "Yes?"

He held out an open hand. "Practice helps," he said. With a bit of reluctance, with just slight hesitation she took his hand and sure enough the familiar sensation flooded her. It was there again, the light; and she thought how only with him she could have all of her.

"You asked me about teaching this and I thought, I might try. Try to help you," He was talking softly, quietly, propping himself with his elbow, so he was slightly above her, not crowding her, but still so intimately close. "Lay your open palm down," he said.

She agreed to this, didn't she? When she gave him her hand. But knowing him - the Aleksander who asked are you sure, letting her know that she could have said no, just as she had said yes, Alina was confident, in some soft and quiet way, that she could pull her palm away. Thinking of that she did as he asked.

He didn't break contact with her, but he kept it incredibly light, almost teasing and barely there. "Good. Can you feel your light?"

She sighed, and it sounded almost like a moan. "Yes."

“Focus on that for a bit,” he said, and Alina did so, her eyes closed, her senses filled with warmth, and softness and him, pulling the light forth so she could feel it, grasp it, wrap her fingers around the invisible threads she would transform into most beautiful orbs of light. Without much thought, she opened her other palm, and she knew it was there. She could hear it in his long drawn breath as well.

“Look at that,” he said and she did. They were laying side by side, his face propped on one palm, the other floating above her hand, the barest, most sensual touch she could imagine from him, as she held a tiny sun. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “Isn’t it?”

Alina smiled, staring at her little sun, at the golden glow flowing from her, joyous and light and happy. “So beautiful,” he was saying, telling her to feel it, to hold onto it, the feeling of her light, calling her milaya, and *dušo moja*, *sunce moje* in such delicate whisper that she did not notice. She did not feel him pull his arm away, because her light was there, in her palm, so bright, so warm.

And it did not go away.

Chapter End Notes

dušo moja - croatian, my soul

sunce moje - croatian, my sunshine

Basically I have decided to sneak Croatian as some form of old Ravkan dialect. It's an actual language, it's my language and there's no need to constantly butcher Russian. :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone - here's a chapter that's somewhat shorter, but hopefully pleasing, feelsy, with Alina and Aleksander addressing some important things and, well, inching closer to each other. The next chapter should be different in tone, and I felt it wouldn't mesh well with the very emotional feel of this part. This might be my own favorite chapter yet, so I hope you like it and enjoy it. <3

Also, if you read "When evening shadows and stars appear", which is Aleksander's POV of his illness, you'll notice a detail that appeared there, which also appears in this fic. ;)

"You cheated," she said, pulling herself up to sit. Her heart was racing, her excitement getting the better of her, reflected in an amused expression on Aleksander's face. "You cheated! You made me think -"

"Yes, *think*," he said as he sat up as well, covering falling away from him. "It comes down to what you think, what you *believe*."

"But that's, that's just too easy -" Alina argued as he grinned at her.

"Is it?" There was fondness in his eyes, transforming his entire face. "If it's so *easy*, then why did I have to cheat?"

He was sitting there in his loose nightshirt, open at the front and hanging askew on him. And thus she could see part of his chest and his clavicle, and the silvery trail of a scar starting near his shoulder, all of it so unfairly attractive and distracting. His hair was in disarray, his beard somewhat bigger than she was used to, and on his face such a brilliant, beautiful grin she wanted to marvel at. Alina knelt on the bed, her excitement taking the better of her. In that moment there was no Fold in the backdrop of her mind, no darkness or the volcra, no Merzost or heresy committed with it; no stag collar beneath her skin. All she knew, all she wanted to think of was how their hands met in power, her palm flat against his, and how he let her take his hand and place his palm against her own. She looked at his fingers, bigger and longer than hers, thought of the multiplied symmetry of their scars. She pulled her palm away, a tiniest bit, and focused on the feeling of his skin so near hers.

"It doesn't feel the same," she said, giving him a look. He smiled, looking amused and tender, moving closer to her and sitting sideways on the bed, his endlessly long legs stretching to her covers.

"Calm down a bit, will you? It doesn't have to feel the same," he said, and even a short laugh escaped him. If she wanted to be annoyed at him, she could not.

"It doesn't?"

"No, of course it doesn't. Does it feel the same each time you summon? Is it always the same? It's not, it's like breathing," he was telling her, taking her hand in both of his. She watched his hands, his long fingers, caressing and gliding along both sides of her hand, and the memory of his hands on her face came back unbidden. Her sun rose in her, warm as the memory, pushing at the seams of her skin. "Each breath is unique, is it not?"

Her palm started to glow. "It is," she said, looking at him, looking at the glow pushing itself through. She had all that power, and had already seized it for herself; she took it from his hands and claimed that she never needed him. But he had the knowledge of decades and centuries, something she could search the books for, for the next several years if not longer. Or, she could rely on him, she could, perhaps, trust him, she could let herself need him. And here he was, all soft and ordinary, and nothing like the Darkling on the skiff, or even the General who claimed her from West Ravka. He was just a man here.

"It's the same thing with summoning," he was saying, his fingers playing with hers, tickling along her palm, the anticipation of the touch more than a contact. "It's just like breathing, a natural process you can just lean into. It's yours. It can never cease to be yours," he was saying. She thought, vaguely, how different this was than Baghra's teaching, how infinitely more kind, and tender and even - loving. If this was manipulation, if this was his vile and dark side, then she was guilty of liking it better than the old woman's walking cane.

"Close your eyes," he said, and this time she did not hesitate, eager to feel, to have her power back, to find a way to reach within herself and find everything she had lost along the way. "And feel it. Just feel it. Just that. Nothing more, nothing less. You don't have to do anything besides that."

She did it, focused on the feel of her light, its warmth, and the subtle, gentlest touch of his hand. She didn't know what was happening, choosing to trust not only Aleksander but the steady flood of light inside of herself.

"That's it," he said. "That's good, so good. You're a marvel, *milaya*," he said and his words made her feel light as a feather, burdenless, weightless. "Open your eyes, my lady," he whispered.

She did so. He was sitting near her, his both hands supporting him as he leaned slightly to the side, and around them was light, like a fine veil, something that sprung from her and took life the way she felt - tender and delicate, warm and desired, still floating around them even though her hand was empty and her palm open to the air of the room, and not him. Alina looked at the glowy curtain, her eyes suddenly filling with tears, because *she had missed it*, her sun, her light, *herself*. She looked at Aleksander, thankful and moved and absolutely happy.

"Thank you," she managed. His expression shifted and softened when he saw her tears.

"Oh my sweet, please don't cry," he said, moving closer and leaning forward, and then he was pulling her into a hug. Without a single thought Alina sank into his embrace, her cheek against his solid chest, against his heartbeat, his face in her hair, her light embracing them both. They stayed like that for a while, Aleksander shifting and arranging himself around her, his arms snug and safe, so she could rest easy, lean into him. Finally she felt tired, her hand coming up to bunch his nightshirt, and then further up to rest against his skin where his neck met his chest. She felt sheltered, in his hold, reveling in the feel of his fingers that moved her hair from her face, she felt his breath, sweet and quiet words he was saying. The world outside with its wars and hatred, its conflicts and judgement had no place here.

"Sleep?" he asked and she nodded against him, and let him pull her down on his pillow. She gave him a bit of space, so he could settle and rest, and before she could miss the feel of his chest against her face, his hand cupped her jaw, warm and heavy and soft. Alina placed her palm near his heart, her knees touching his leg. Aleksander broke contact only to pull a cover over them. One cover, shared by them both. Oh, how nicely warm she felt.

Alina fell asleep to the feel of his hand on her cheek, and woke up warm and held, him wrapped around her, not a breath of space between them.

*

The reason why Alina started sneaking into the kitchens every morning was Ivan. And coffee. She could easily order the coffee with her breakfast but it was never quite as good as the one Ivan made. She would braid her hair and pull her kefta tight around one of her day dresses, hurrying down the stairs and greeting the maids as she went. Ivan and Fedyor were up before most of the staff, and Alina would knock lightly before she entered. There was something endearing about the fact that Ivan had a cup ready for her. He would just nod and hand it to her, and Fedyor would smile as she excused herself to hurry back upstairs.

"Such excitement about a cup of coffee," Aleksander said when she came back. The breakfast did not arrive yet, but he was already fully dressed, looking like the man she knew, the one who saved her from the Druskelle, the one who walked confidently through battlefield and royal court, the softness of the previous night all gone from his appearance - except from his eyes and the gentle way his lips tilted up when he saw her. She felt her cheeks flush as she thought of the way he held her, something that was meant only for the dark.

"Perhaps you should not judge something you have not tried yet," she said, hiding behind said cup after she took her first sip.

"Then let me try," he said in the same tone from last night, the one that made the sun rise within her. Alina was giving over her cup before her mouth could protest and she watched him take a careful sip, his mouth and his throat, and then his eyes as he handed the cup back. "It's interesting. I would not guess you enjoyed something like that."

"It grows on you," she said. There was a knock and he went to open the door - to the maid who brought breakfast and Ivan, standing on the side with a stack of reports ready. If the heartreder gave her a small conspiratory glance when he saw her with a cup of coffee, nobody would ever mention it. Aleksander took the reports, anxious to get back to his work and started leafing through the papers before Ivan was able to leave.

"Monseno?" he asked, a name vaguely familiar to Alina. She took the breakfast tray to the dining table near the window and told the young maid that she could leave, observing how Ivan shook his head, how two men exchanged worried looks.

"Nothing new yet, *moy soverenyi*," Ivan informed.

"Well as soon as it arrives," Aleksander said and Ivan nodded.

"I will inform you at once," he said, leaving Aleksander and Alina to their breakfast.

Aleksander went to the grand war table where he left the reports, then went to Alina, starting to arrange the breakfast food with her - tea and honey, butter and bread, little pancakes and jam and cottage cheese. This was the first time they did this together, their hands meeting over the bowl of sugar cubes, Aleksander smiling as he let Alina take them first.

"No, you do it. I will finish my coffee first," she said as she took her seat, one closer to the window, overlooking the gardens. Aleksander claimed the sugar bowl and filled his plate. It was lovely seeing him well again, and seeing him eat without any prompting, the surest sign that he was recovering, made her heart swell. That certainly had everything to do with them all being safe, with Little Palace and the Grisha, the refugees and the war fronts, with peace treaties and villages that still needed help. The world that needed General Kirigan and his strategies, and clearly nothing, if very little to do with the way he held her when she first woke, his arm heavy across her waist, his chest pressed to her back. It had been ten days, just ten days and she crossed the distance from his reluctant ally to a woman he held in his sleep, and she did not want, did not dare to explain it to herself.

"There's a matter I need to inform you of," he started after he finished a serving of pancakes with jam and stirred two sugar cubes into a single cup of tea. Alina observed how much he loved the sweets, really anything that tasted sweet, not just the pastries or walnut rolls. "The Tsaritsa will celebrate her birthday in three weeks from now, which is an event that we, sadly, have to attend," he said. "You might want to discuss the dress and a new kefta with Genya, and I am sure it will be a relief after you've been my sick maid for ten days."

"Are you dismissing me?" Alina asked, matching his light tone and taking in the new information.

"Saints forbid," he said. "But you need to occupy yourself with something that isn't my illness."

"It wasn't a problem," she said. "It was... -" Her duty? Her choice, she thought, her wish, her single focus. "I wouldn't let anyone else do it."

"I'm very thankful for that, Alina. I'm -," he paused, emotions crossing his face. "I surely did not deserve it."

It wasn't his words, but the way he looked at her when he said it, that made her stop and think. Did she know what Aleksander deserved? Was she completely certain? Was he truly a monster, or was he a man merely wearing a mask?

"Wouldn't the world be a dreadful place, if we all got exactly what we deserved? I wanted to do it, I *wanted* to be with you," she said, watching as her words affected him, changing his expression from carefully guarded to vulnerable. She chose not to dwell on what that expression could do to her, what it could prompt her into. "Was I a horrible maid?" she asked with a small, self-conscious smile.

"Oh no," he said, shaking his head and pulling his chair closer to hers. Reaching for her hand on top of the tablecloth, giving it a brief squeeze, as if he was testing if their physical closeness of the previous night extended to the daytime. She squeezed back. It was short but warm, and full of recognition. An agreement. "Not at all."

"Well then," she said, slowly parting their hands, leaving hers close to his fingers. "You could show me my new rooms. You know, the ones you didn't tell me about?"

It was a gentle barb and he responded with a smile.

"Those you have already seen?"

"I might have," she said. "But without you to accompany me."

"I will show you right now," he said and stood, offering her his hand in a fairly dramatic fashion. Was he always this ceremonious, this... dramatic? She took his hand and grabbed the last round pancake from her plate.

Alina's new chambers were connected to Aleksander's by a single door leading from his bedroom to hers. Just a couple of weeks ago Alina might have frowned or even recoiled at the mere thought that her bedroom was so easily accessible to him, but now she knew it served several purposes - if something were to happen, he didn't have to cross hallways to get to her, and if she needed him, for any reason, he was right there. And last but not the least, she could bet it would do wonders for the gossip mill of the Palace.

The bed that was to be hers was lovely - wide and comfortable looking, dressed in soft beige and white linens, with less frills and ribbons than the one in the Vezda suite - which was far more suited for a girl, a young maiden. These were the chambers of a lady. A wife. Another step in a direction with no return. Alina wondered who commissioned the furniture, who picked out the tasteful decorations as they passed through the rooms, her first and Aleksander following. She had a small reading room, bookshelf completely filled with books, and this was where she stopped. And surely there were the books that grabbed her interest, and books that she started to read, the books she picked out and planned on reading -

"Aleksander? How did you -?"

"Are they not to your liking? I could -, " he started but she interrupted him, when it occurred to her just what he had done.

"Did you have someone report to you what I was reading? Ever since you found me?"

He opened his mouth, closed it. His voice, when he spoke, was laced with pain and something she barely recognized.

It was fear.

"I wanted to make it comfortable for you. Bring you the things you enjoyed, things you were interested in -"

It reminded her all too much of the things he did before, the lavish tent she was put in just after he had the amplifier stuck into her, the way he found out about the flowers, the way he kept track of what she did, so he could affect her. But now she knew that it was simply the way he worked, the way he engaged the world around him, and before she condemned him, she decided to speak first. To speak and to listen as well.

"Do you know that you could have asked?"

"Perhaps," he said, and she could feel him withdrawing, pulling walls around himself, his eyes seeming wet. He blinked it away. "Would you have told me? After we arrived from the front? Or would you have asked me to leave you alone? Forget the rooms and books and -"

Alina felt her own eyes prickling. She could see now what he was trying to do, since he brought her back, she could see how he feared and hoped and didn't dare showing it. Each flower he sent, each note he wrote to her, she could see how her silence chipped away his resilience. What he did wasn't about convincing her to forget what happened; but asking her to forgive him, without words, perhaps because he didn't know how, or perhaps because he expected, fully and completely, for her to turn him down.

"I understand what you're saying," she said, wanting to tell him that she saw him, and everything he meant. "I see what you wanted to do. But from now on, Aleksander... Just ask. Just ask, and I will tell you."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I hope you're ready. :P Please let me know what you think :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina was aware why Aleksander loathed Lantsov royal birthday events long before Genya was done explaining what the occasion entailed.

There was a dinner on the first day, a concerto on the second, including new compositions crafted by court's composer in Tsaritsa's honor, something that made Aleksander effectively roll his eyes at. He is a pretty horrible composer, Genya explained as she laid down pieces of jewelry on Alina's table for her to see. Aleksander stood nearby, a teacup in his hand.

"Nothing overly extravagant," he said. "Tsaritsa is incredibly vain. We wouldn't want Lady Kirigan to outshine her... although I am not sure how she is *not* going to do so.

"I ... am?" Alina spoke, not quite sure what to say, but Genya definitely did know.

"We cannot make the sun stop shining, *moy soverenyi*."

"I would never want that," Aleksander replied and Alina was certain he was ... flirting with her, except Genya was there to witness it all.

"Then there is the hunt," Genya stated.

"Oh but it's for the married me."

"For married men, yes. You are one now," Genya remarked. The realization and adjacent not quite horror on Aleksander's face were almost comical. "I see how you would be confused. All these years you were never married," she paused to suppress a smile. "The hunt involves men, but their ladies are supposed to see them off, and await their return. And finally the ball," Genya sighed. "For which you will need a dress, a new kefta, with matching jewelry and hairpieces..."

"And at this point I will leave you, ladies," Aleksander said and took his departure. Alina sat in front of the vanity, not certain if she liked it better than the one in the Vezda suite. Most of her belongings were brought to her new rooms. If that felt oddly comforting, she was deciding not to dwell on it.

"Saints forbid men hear a detail or two about dresses, although they do seem to enjoy them. On occasion, Genya untied Alina's braid and started combing her hair. "You need a dress suited for a married lady, but a young lady nevertheless. And it needs to be dark, to match -"

"My cheerfully dressed husband?" Alina grinned.

"Of course. Symbolism is everything in the court. Every single detail you wear will be noticed, discussed and judged. Every single glance you either give or don't give to your husband will be a matter of discussion. Affection is advised, in moderation, of course."

Of course. Alina laughed upon seeing Genya's expression, all fake innocence and seriousness, half expecting another suggestion about... seducing her husband. "And then, finally, there's dancing. You absolutely *have* to -"

Alina paled. "Wait, wait. Are you saying I will *have* to dance?"

"Every lady has to dance. Esteemed Second Army General's wife *definitely* has to dance."

".... Saints help me," Alina muttered.

*

"Well, we're not Saints, but we still may be of some help," Fedyor offered confidently. He was standing in the middle of Genya's room, the table, the chairs and settee moved aside. David had brought something that Genya called a music box, because, obviously, one could not learn how to dance without music.

"We shall see that," Genya said to Fedyor, sceptically eyeing him, David and Alina.

All Alina wanted was to run away, but she knew she could not - in three weeks she would have to attend Tsaritsa's ball, which was the first ball of the season, and the event when season's debutantes were presented to Tsaritsa and high society. Aleksander had to attend, which meant Alina had to attend as well. If she couldn't dance she would make Aleksander look bad for marrying someone uncultured and unworthy of civil society. Alina knew that pretenses and impressions were the language of power, that Aleksander handled a fine balance of it while trying to turn the tide of both the war and oppression of their kind - and since the Tsar held the power and made decisions based on whims and impressions, leaving the best impression was of utmost importance.

“Are you trying to say that we can’t dance?” Fedyor asked, pointing at David who didn’t seem to really want to be there.

“Let’s be truly honest here. Fedya, you’reokay. David ... well, nobody will look if David makes a single wrong step. The only person who can dance is Ivan -”

“Let’s not bother Ivan,” Alina hurried. She looked at Fedyor for encouragement, which he eagerly gave. Even though she achieved a tentative truce with Ivan, she felt a lot more comfortable with Fedyor, and the very idea of dancing made her extremely nervous.

Genya insisted that Alina had to know at least five different dances. Waltz, a dance that was popular in Kerch and gaining popularity in Ravka, was not as difficult as Alina expected. Everything else, though, was an absolute mess. Genya would insist on one thing while Fedyor claimed some particular dance followed different rules. They would start to bicker in a manner that would have been funny, if the entire situation wasn’t so frustratingly dire, and at one point, five days later, Alina decided to go and find Ivan and ask him for help herself. When she said she needed help, Ivan seemed alarmed.

“Did something happen? Do I need to get the General?”

“No, you really don’t have to. It’s me who needs help with something you would find absolutely trivial,” she said. She couldn’t possibly predict Ivan’s reaction when they finally arrived at Genya’s rooms. He started to laugh.

“Oh Genya,” he said, trying to stop laughing. “Sankta Elizabetha and all the Saints! Genya, did you somehow forget that Fedya is a *hopeless* dancer?”

“I might have been just slightly desperate,” Genya said.

Shaking his head and stifling his laugh, he offered his hand to Alina. “You should have just asked, *moya sovrenyia*,” he said.

Serves me right, Alina thought later, remembering what she said to Aleksander just a couple of days earlier; as she finally made progress in all dances which any sophisticated lady was supposed to know.

*

In less than three weeks time, Alina was aware why Aleksander loathed the royal birthdays. The lavish events were unnecessarily, *cruelly* wasteful; while the army, the ordinary citizens of Ravka and refugees struggled to get by. Alina needed four different outfits for four days of birthday celebrations, and a completely new kefta, despite possessing six of them.

Everything you own, everything you have already worn and were seen wearing is considered beneath the honor of attending the noble occasion of Tsaritsa’s celebrations, Genya recited, listing the rules, the details, the things a court lady ought to know, describing the events in detail. By the time the birthday arrived Alina was loathing it as well.

“You will be asked about your husband,” Genya told her over tea. It was the evening before the celebrations began, and Alina just wanted to soothe her nerves, anxious about the performance she had to put on, knowing that her actions would reflect on Aleksander, on his plans, on the refugees and his intentions and war strategies. Genya continued her instructions. “Married women like to inquire and gossip and brag. They will likely ask veiled and not so veiled questions about how he treats you in bed.”

Genya said that without batting an eyelash, but Alina coughed out her tea.

“Are you serious?”

“Quite serious. Your husband is a mystery to them.”

“... *why*?”

“Because he would not bed otkazat’sya noblewomen, and they find him strange, intimidating, yet very attractive,” Genya continued, her tone pointedly ordinary, as if she was talking about clothes. “They will likely imply that he is either a brute or cold, that he treats you harshly or doesn’t bed you at all,” she said. “And you will want to deny all of that, of course.”

“He is not cold,” Alina said before she could stop herself.

“I would very much doubt that, considering the way he looks at you,” Genya’s words caused a blush, and Alina’s thoughts went in all sorts of directions that she could not discuss in a polite society. Maybe even not with Genya. “All of this, of course, is to see and gauge your reaction, and deduce what is the nature of your relationship.”

“But why? Why is it important how we live our life?” Alina asked, noting belatedly how she referred to herself and Aleksander. A single unit, a joined pair. A *we*.

“It’s not important, it’s merely a source of amusement for them, as it is the case with most people. You are of course not obliged to divulge anything truly private. But it’s also wise to let them know that you harbor affection for your husband, which is of course returned. In every aspect of your life.”

“Maybe I should use your exact words.”

"You can do that. It's a good enough answer, coupled with a blush and a smile," Genya said. "But, it's also good to afford yourself some experience on the topic."

Alina sighed. "Genya -"

Genya shrugged, hiding a pretty smile behind a cup of tea. "Alina, please, be honest with yourself. If you don't feel any attraction or affection for him, would you blush each and every time I brought this up?"

"It's... it's not *affection* that is the problem," Alina said slowly, realizing what she was saying. "But..."

"But what? Your idea of good and bad and how the world should be handled?"

"Those are not trivial issues," Alina said, wondering if Genya was intentionally downplaying it all.

"They are not, I agree. But your husband cares for you and would rather suffer than lose you again. Within that frame, a lot can be negotiated."

"Can good and evil be negotiated?" Alina asked. Genya sighed.

"One man's hero is another man's enemy, Alina. There are no absolutes in this world," Genya said, slowly, tiredly, seeming much older than she was. "And there are reasons for everything, and I am sure the General would gladly explain his reasons to you. It doesn't mean you have to accept them or treat them as your own. But understanding would probably do a world of good."

Alina went to bed that evening, thinking of the things she told Genya, things she *revealed* to Genya, and everything Genya said to her. The lush, comfortable bed in her own rooms awaited her, yet somehow she had the trouble parting with what became her side of Aleksnader's bed. There were her belongings on the nightstand nearby, a book she was reading, her hairpins, her hairbrush; her dressing gown at the foot of the bed. She had claimed this space, *his space*, and he let her.

Aleksander was asleep, still exhausted by daily activities, still recovering after being ill and Alina was worried how he would fare through four day long celebrations. It was an unnecessary display of the royal family's vanity and pride, completely pointless and yet monumentally important. She was realising that over just a couple of weeks she had sided with Aleksander, that she started caring if he would succeed or not, that she started seeing his side of things. Was she betraying herself? She swore she would never be a captive again, but she learned in a rather harsh way it was not something she could so easily decide. Was she a captive *here*, in her position as a wife who was treated with respect and protected? Or was the entire Ravka a prisoner, and not wanting to be one was more a dream than a feasible goal? She looked at Aleksander, asleep, his covers thrown aside as he twisted just a moment before, as if he couldn't find comfort. Alina reached over, to touch his forehead with the back of her hand, determining that he did not have fever. That it was probably just a bad dream.

And how did he treat her in bed? He would hold her hand and encourage her to summon, generous and kind, his touch a caress. He offered but did not take, holding her only when she wanted it, except when they both succumbed to sleep, wrapping around one another instead of drifting apart. He never touched her in a way she did not agree to, even though sometimes she almost wished he would, remembering how his hands roamed her body in the War Room as they kissed. And now, as she moved closer to pull his covers back, she noticed how his nightshirt had ridden up, revealing his stomach, his body relaxed, looking almost soft. Instead of covering him she looked on, studied his fair skin and dark hair, spreading from his navel below, tempted to touch, to know how his hardness would feel against her hand; but instead she made herself pull his covers up to his chest.

She did bring her pillow close to his, so she could rest and look at his face as he slept, and she found his hand, warm and comfortable, and wrapped her fingers around his. Aleksander sighed, seemingly feeling relief as her powers joined his, the light and darkness, a careful balance between them.

*

The first two days came and went without much trouble, even if both events were dreadfully tedious. Just as Genya said, a lot of attention was directed at Alina and Aleksander, for different reasons and purposes. The noblemen wanted to know if the General was back to his good health and ready to take over the war front again, while the ladies mostly offered compliments on Alina's fresh looks and elegant gowns and obvious marital happiness.

The event that had Alina worried came on the third day - the hunt.

The entire thing was vile at best. The Tsar had hunting grounds, consisting of the entire forest she had been riding through with Aleksander so long ago, but at the current time of the year was not the hunting season, and thus several foxes were captured beforehand, brought in too small cages and released into the woods, with hunting dogs eagerly awaiting to go after them.

The hunters were supposed to follow on their horses, using only rifles. Alina had never seen Aleksander handling an *otkazat'sya* weapon, until today, and when she did, she could not suppress a foreboding feeling.

"He can handle a rifle just fine," Ivan had said, standing behind her with Fedyor. Most ladies whose husbands took part had servants and staff members accompanying them, Alina had two heartrenders which effectively prevented any unwelcome comments.

She watched Aleksander as he talked to other men, his entire demeanor distant but polite. She knew that he was not happy about this, that he did not want to take part, yet he did not have any choice if he didn't want to offend the Tsar and Tsaritsa. At one point he looked at her and her heart clenched, and she could see in his eyes that he knew. She could see his expression softening, as if he wanted to give her a wordless assurance, just before he mounted his horse. All the men did.

A shot rang out, the dogs were released; there was barking and haste and fury as the hunters spurred their horses into running. All Alina was able to see was the color of Aleksander's kefta, standing out among different coats of other gentlemen, black as the night, a match to her own.

Hours passed. The ladies had a picnic served, with tea and pastries and various meals on four different tables. They were expected to wait for their men's arrival. There were chairs and pillows and everyone seemed to have a good time, engaging in completely idle conversation while Alina jumped at the every sound of gunshot. She could not eat and she forced herself to small talk until at one point Fedyor whisked her away under the pretense that he needed to consult her on something. He led her away, offering his arm in his usual gentlemanly manner.

"I may be out of line, and it may not be my place to say this, but the General will be fine. He knows how to handle a rifle, he knows how to avoid getting shot at," he said, his face filled with care and compassion. "I can sense how worried you are," he added softly.

Away from judgmental and inquiring glances Alina let her shoulders sag. "I . . . know all of that. I know he's been a General for a long time, and yet -"

"Your heart cannot help, but worry," Fedyor said. "I wish I could make this easier for you -"

"I just want him to come back," Alina said, realizing how her voice trembled, how close to tears she was, despite all the knowledge and reasoning. A battlefield was more dangerous than a hunt, and Tsar's noblemen were not as good at shooting as soldiers were. Aleksander survived so many years, so many decades of war; saw the killing in every shape and form and somehow managed to save himself. He would come back, *he would*, even if he was still somewhat fatigued, he would endure, and in the evening Alina would see him to bed, the same bed she shared with him for the past month, and maybe she could watch him as he slept.

Hours passed, the sun climbing up the sky. First hunters came back, bringing the animals they slayed tied to the back of their saddles; a sight that made Alina nauseous. She barely ate through the day, managing to keep a semblance of calm solely thanks to Fedyor. One by one, men came back on their horses, greeted by their wives, some of them receiving even affectionate hugs and kisses.

But Aleksander wasn't coming.

Another hour passed, and nearly everyone was back - except for Aleksander and the young Count Fedorov, whose wife looked obviously distressed, the same way Alina had felt. The men started to discuss sending a search party, and Alina knew that, as they discussed, the time was passing. If either of the missing men was injured, then every minute counted. Alina looked at Ivan - Genya was not here and Alina could not rely on her advice, but in reality she did not want it. She wanted the tactical heartreender who knew war and danger inside out, in the same way as Aleksander did.

"I can go," Ivan said, just as she expected he would.

"I want to come along," Alina spoke, feeling, *knowing* that she couldn't stand being left behind to wait. "I can ride just fine, I just need a horse, I need to come along -"

"Yes," Ivan said, sharing a look with Fedyor. "We will go, and you will come with us."

What came next passed in a blur - a short carriage ride to the Little Palace, a quick walk to the stables, where Ivan ordered horses saddled with utmost haste. Alina mounting her horse, the same white mare Aleksander had saddled for her the first time he took her riding, and then three of them hurrying off, Alina following the men.

She did now know how long it took, how far they had gone - in her estimation not too far, not as far as the wishing well where Aleksander had brought her - until Ivan pulled his horse to a halt.

"I can hear them. I can hear heartbeats," he said, looking at Fedyor, who nodded. They slowed down, Ivan dismounting and leading his horse by the reins, through the woods and towards a clearing surrounded by trees. There, Alina saw Aleksander walking beside his horse, reins in his hand, while the young count sat on the black stallion's back, seeming injured.

Alina forgot everything - the hunt, Tsaritsa, the birthday celebrations and its convoluted, made up traditions; she forgot about her horse, about Ivan and Fedyor and the entire forsaken day. She ran. Aleksander saw her, pausing in the middle of the field and then giving the reins to the young Count before he hurried towards her. She reached him and stumbled, and Aleksander caught her forearms, steady and sure, looking whole and uninjured. Alina couldn't rely on the sight of him alone, she pulled him close, touching him, her hands running up his arms, reaching his shoulders and then his face as she almost stood on her toes.

"I am fine," he said. "I am fine, I am fine, I am all right," he was repeating, but the words did not register. She had to know, she had to *feel* him as the tension broke and the tears were spilling from her eyes. "Oh my sweet," Aleksander said softly, opening his arms to pull her close, to fold himself around her, but Alina needed more. With hands on both sides of his face and without a coherent thought she pulled him to her and kissed him.

His surprise came and was gone in an instant - Alina felt him respond, his soft touch a contrast to her desperate grip, his lips parting to hers, inviting her to kiss him deeper, to lose herself in relief and knowledge that he was unharmed and safe, and in her arms. They kissed until her breath lasted and then she had to part from him, breathing harshly as his lips trailed along her cheeks, her eyelids, her forehead. He held her then, his arms steady around her as Ivan and Fedyor finally approached and greeted their General. Alina forced herself to part from Aleksander, but one of her hands remained in his.

"Young Count Fedorov needs a healer," Aleksander said. "His horse was wounded, and sadly nothing could be done. I had to shoot the animal. The Count broke his arm and he is, I assume, in considerable pain, though he is not complaining at all."

"I am thankful you saved me, General," the Count said. "And the pain is not that bad."

"We need to go, then," Ivan spoke. "You and Lady Kirigan can mount her horse, that way we'll be faster."

Aleksander agreed and helped Alina mount, climbing behind her in an instant - and all that she knew on the way home was his arm around her waist and his chest solid and certain behind her.

*

That evening Alina called for a bath as Aleksander went to report to the Tsar on what happened. He parted from her with a kiss to her hand, with servants around them. Alina could not hug him the way she wanted to and she told herself to wait until everything was done, until they could retreat to his chambers- their chambers - and the rest of the world finally faded away. She tried to calm as she scrubbed her skin, to sort her thoughts, to somehow make sense of what happened, but all she could think of was Aleksander and how she wanted him back.

She finished her bath, shivering as she dried her skin with a towel, giving up on all socializing for the remainder of the afternoon and pulling on a light cotton shift, wrapping herself in the knit dressing gown and going to the fireplace. Gradually, her body warmed, giving her signs that she was tired, the tension and excitement finally easing. She yawned, curling in a big chair where Aleksander used to sit and read. She fully intended to get up, maybe call for dinner or just go to bed. She just needed a small break, just to close her eyes for one tiny moment and then she fell asleep.

She woke up to the feeling of arms around her, lifting her from the chair.

"Shhh, it's me, it's okay," she heard Aleksander's voice as he carried her, and her head fell to his chest. "You had to be scared, I know, Fedyor told me... *dušo moja, ljubavi moja*," he said, setting her down on the mattress. Before he could pull away, Alina pulled at his hand.

"Stay," she said, blinking up at him. He looked harried, and tired, and whatever he intended to do, whatever he had to attend to, he changed his mind. "Please stay, I've been waiting for you."

She was half asleep as she sat up, shrugging off her dressing gown. Aleksander put it aside, at the foot of the bed and then undressed as she sat and waited, her heart hammering in her chest, but this time for a different reason. And then he came, he climbed into bed and sat next to her, he pulled her close and held her. And finally, blissfully she could hold him in return.

"*Sasha*," she whispered, moving slightly apart and looking up, her eyes on his lips.

"*Ljubavi*," he lowered his head to hers and then he was holding her, kissing her, slow and tender and soft. She parted her lips and he responded, tasting her tongue, her mouth, her breath catching. They didn't need to part for the sake of an onlooker, or for Ivan and Fedyor and he kept kissing her until she thought she would float away. "Tell me what you want," he said, touching his forehead to hers.

"*You*. For you to hold me," she was saying. She could think about what it all meant tomorrow, right now she just *needed* it all.

Aleksander nodded, pulling her to him, to lay beside him, safe in his embrace. Alina placed her hand against his heart, feeling how strongly, how steadily it beat. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

"*dušo moja*" - my soul

"*ljubavi moja/ljubavi*" - my love, beloved

Yeah, I thought endearments were called for. I truly hope you enjoyed this, and that I lived up to the expectations as an author. I was looking forward to writing this through this entire week! <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes down to the proverbial italicized "oh" we all know so well. I hope you enjoy it, and you'll hopefully leave me lots and lots of comments. :P

Aleksander's bedchamber was filled with a soothing hue of green. It could look black under certain lighting, or rather when there was a lack of light, but even when it was dark outside and the small bedside lamp was dimmed, the color wasn't the suffocating cold darkness a true black would be. The sheets were dark green and beige, the furniture a lovely, warm shade of mahogany, the books he kept a colorful mosaic of knowledge - ironically, Aleksander's kefta was a rare black object in it all.

Alina woke up to the dawn light, hushed colors of deep forest and a feeling of another body close to hers. It was still so early, and she felt drowsy, still tired, still needing rest. The arm around her waist pulled her closer when she stretched.

"Already awake?" she could hear Aleksander's voice, quiet but fully present.

"Mhm," she tried to burrow closer to him, because he was solid and nicely warm and she could get away with being held before she opened her eyes and faced the day and everything that had changed. He nudged her, his nose against hers and she had to open her eyes, see him watching her, see his smile, which turned into uncertain hesitation when his gaze met hers.

"Milaya," he whispered. His eyes were tentative, searching for something. Alina smiled without much thought. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," she said. "Sleepy."

"That's all right," he was observing her like he was trying to decide something. Slowly his hand rose from her waist and he cupped her cheek. "You can rest longer today. No need to-"

Without forethought, Alina reached for his face, her fingers landing on his lips. He tensed and she thought how he wasn't certain what he was to do, or not to do. She kept her fingers where they were, a slight press that parted his lips as his eyes searched hers. She didn't look away.

"Sasha," she said and it was enough to bring him closer, lean over her and kiss her.

It took so little to make her think how she wanted this so much, a hand on her cheek, his lips parting above hers. He kissed her slowly, without any hurry or a second thought, with both tenderness and passion as he tilted her head and tasted her mouth. He pushed his knee between her legs and she spread them, moaned into his mouth when his hand cupped her breast. He pulled away, slightly, kissing the rest of her face, his beard wonderful and soft against her skin. He wasn't asking if she was sure - they were holding one another and Alina thought how he didn't dare to speak, just as she didn't, because they were suddenly here, at this point, and neither wanted to lose it. Not by going back or by going forward. But they couldn't simply stay, suspended in the moment for eternity.

What she did do was wind her hands around him, under his arms and over his shoulders, her face in the hollow of his throat, where she could feel it all, his heartbeat, his breath, his power, all of him above her and all around her. And then she just held him close.

He sighed, his muscles tensing.

"I just wish... I wish for you to stay. Just stay. Please don't leave," he said then in a voice so quiet and small that she wasn't certain if he spoke at all.

"Aleksander?" She nudged him until he moved so she could see him, his face half hidden by the shadows of the early day. And the man that looked back, the teary eyed man from the tent, the sad and lonely man from the War Room, wasn't the Darkling or the Heretic or even the General. But just a man.

They didn't have a wedding night, they didn't have anything nearly normal or customary what a wanted marriage would entail. It felt like everything they did have was cut short and stolen. He looked at her, and what she couldn't put into words, she hoped to show in action - she pulled him close, until his forehead rested against hers. "I'm not leaving," she whispered. I'm not leaving *you*, she thought. She felt him nodding, she felt his breathing, his chest expanding under her arm. "Please don't hurt me," she said then, knowing how vague it was, how unspecific and not truly feasible, but she needed to let it out, what she feared, what she was terrified of. To let herself care, and attach herself to him, to let him in close and then have him betray everything she believed he was.

"I won't hurt you. Not consciously, not by choosing for you. I will do-" he started to say, to promise but she hushed him with a kiss. The less promise he gave her, the less he had to break, but the bottom of it was, when he said it, the moment he said it, she believed him. And she *wanted* to believe him. "Just stay. Stay, stay -" he pleaded, his lips soft against hers as she was catching her breath.

"I will stay," she said, and if anything felt like a wedding vow, this did. He smiled, sadness and regret making way for relief and wonder.

"I need to get up early, I need... I have meetings. Things that have come up and I need to deal with them -"

"Yes," she said. "Go. Will you tell me about it later?" she asked, nudging his nose with hers.

"I will. I will tell you about it, tomorrow, after we've dealt with all the - you know," he said and sighed over the last two words.

"I know," she said. He kissed her again, and then once more and she started grinning because it didn't seem like he was about to stop. "Don't you have a meeting to attend to?"

He smiled. A full, wonderful, relaxed smile. A smile that she had seen only twice.

"Just one more," he said, claiming her lips again, pressing against them until she opened her mouth, until he could lick inside. As if someone, something would steal her from him again.

*

Genya brought coffee. Alina was sitting at her vanity, brushing her hair - and when she felt the scent she realized that Ivan had made her coffee, just like he did each morning, and that she had *forgotten* it.

"Before you say anything, I got the chance to try Ivan's coffee, which is not something you can easily get," Genya said, putting two cups down. "I can see the blush," she added.

"Genya -"

"I hope you had a nice night?"

Alina sighed. "I did. I slept," she said to the mirror expression of an incredulous look and a raised eyebrow. "I was exhausted."

"And that was all?"

Alina's blush deepened. She tried to hide the smile that kept coming back to her face behind her cup, but to no avail. She was Sun Summoner, but she probably didn't need to summon anything today - she was shining already. It was too visible. Anyone could tell.

"We... kissed," she said, and Genya smiled. A true, soft smile.

"And then?"

"And then, nothing. I needed -" Alina sighed. She thought of what she *needed* as Genya took over the hairbrush. She wanted more than just a kiss, but she was scared to give in, thinking that she would be giving up on something crucial and important - yet she couldn't pinpoint what that was.

"I guess it was a nice kiss," Genya said carefully. "You look happy."

"I... *am*," Alina said slowly, her words followed by a sip of coffee.

"Is that so bad?"

"No," Alina said. "But..." she paused, thinking of Aleksander's promise, of his pleading for her not to leave, and wondered if they both asked from the other not to do what they were most afraid of.

"What do you desire?" Genya asked her. "That's easier, so focus on that."

The question prompted the memory of him touching her, of his leg between hers, his body over hers and Alina knew what she desired - she couldn't say it, couldn't describe how she imagined Aleksander, her hands pulling at his nightshirt until it was gone, until she could touch his chest, and his back, feel how warm his skin was. But she also desired to be loved and cherished. To matter and be counted upon and treated truthfully and fairly.

"Oh, *I see*," Genya said, teasing. "Have you ever done it with anyone?"

Alina shook her head. "Not... well. I've made out with a few ... soldiers. But i have never -"

"Never completed the act?"

"Yes. Exactly," She sighed, and rubbed her eyes, trying to put into words what was bothering her. "What if I accept it and it's terrible? Painful and uncomfortable and -"

Genya's hands paused. For a moment she was very, very still. But then she spoke, calmly and without any hesitation. "It doesn't have to be. It can be rather wonderful. But that requires a partner who listens to you and works with you, not against you."

"What do you mean?"

"That you have to try, and see what you like, and tell him that. Tell him what makes you uncomfortable, or if you're not ready for something. And that he should listen - and before you say anything, or think anything, yes, I think he will abide by your wishes."

At that Alina just sighed, Genya continued working on her hair, her hands sure, soothing, certain. "Men, like us, desire pleasure. And just like us, they can be given pleasure in many ways... by touch, or by mouth or when our bodies are joined. You don't have to do everything at once," she

said, arranging Alina's hair. "And you can absolutely enjoy everything you decide to do... the way you want it to. And seeing him enjoy it? Might be lovely."

*

The dress was black, with distinctly less embroidery than her kefta she wore at the Winter Fete. The material was silky and fine under her fingers, the neckline modest, with full and lush skirts. The embroidery was gold and black, a perfect reminder of embroidery of Aleksander's kefta, a clear symbol of whom she belonged with; with hints of dark blue among the black. Like irises.

"General's request," Genya said, when Alina pointed out the additional color. Alina smiled, thinking how thoughtful that was, and then realizing that her first thought was one of joy, and not recoiling over the fact that he did something without consulting her first. It was a surprise. It was a *nice* surprise.

She was supposed to wait for him in her chambers, but after spending a quarter of an hour there, pacing and fretting, she decided to seek him out, a black coat on her hand. He wasn't in the War Room, and he wasn't in his bedroom - he came from his study, fully dressed, his dark hair carefully combed into a tidy, near regal look.

"Your kefta," Alina said as she observed the garment he was wearing. It was new and exquisite, and along with the usual silky black embroidery, it had gold. Gold on his sleeves, and on his lapels, and golden threads carefully and subtly woven through it all - her light combined with his shadows. She came closer to study it, noticing how he watched, how he awaited her approval. "It's... me," she said, touching lightly on one sleeve, the material soft and fine.

"It's you," he said. "It means you, symbolizes *you*."

She couldn't help but feel moved, touched by the gesture that was so open and obvious to literally everyone who might lay their eyes upon him. The Black General, the one who never wore anything but black was wearing her color now. She let him help her into her coat and took his arm as he offered it.

Despite the days becoming warmer, the evenings were still cold. Alina appreciated the coat around her as they walked towards the Grand Palace, the certainty of Aleksander's arm, the way he felt next to her as they finally reached the Grand Palace - how the people, servants and noblemen alike, parted for him to pass.

The Palace was crowded, making Alina feel disoriented at first. Aleksander tightened the hold on her arm and she returned it, realizing that all eyes were directed to them, and how they must have looked - a matched set, a couple, an obvious statement not only of belonging together, but to each other... and then, surrounded by the walls of the Tsar's palace, the court members and noble folk, who all looked at Grisha with mixture of disdain and fear, Alina realized how much of a rebellion a simple golden thread was. For Aleksander was stating that he did not belong to the Tsar, or them here; he was not theirs to use and command. He was *hers*.

Many people were approaching them, offering congratulations, commenting on their looks, admiring Alina, or wishing them a blessing of an offspring soon. Alina felt like all they wanted was to take a better look at them both, for she was certain that there was plenty of gossip about her behavior yesterday, her open affection for her husband.

The ceremonies went on, pointless and tedious. She focused on Aleksander's arm, the golden thread of his kefta that matched the one of her dress, on the buzz and tension of anticipating for them to finally be free of this event and go... home. The debutantes to the society were presented, the dances begun.

"For all the years I haven't been dancing at these celebrations, I am fearing now I will embarrass you," he said.

"I do not believe it," Alina said, certain he was exaggerating. The waltz was starting, and what she practiced with Fedyor and then Ivan was finally becoming reality.

"So you trust me?" he asked, teasing tone in his voice, the lightness hiding tension underneath.

"I trust in your dancing abilities," she replied, observing his expressive face, his warm dark eyes. "And yes. I think... I do trust you," she said, letting him lead her through the dance.

Alina did not count the sets - when she said she was tired and that she needed a break, Aleksander led her away from the ballroom and through the halls, showing her statues and paintings and royal portraits. He seemed to know the most fascinating details, embarrassing stories about past rulers of Ravka, things you couldn't find in a book. At the bottom of a hallway he paused in front of another portrait and Alina could sense the tension, something cold as blackest shadows he was able to conjure.

"Aleksander, who is that?"

He waited before he replied.

"King Anastas," he finally said. For a moment she was confused, then she made the connection. The king who commissioned the Grisha advisor - who created the Fold. She remembered the history she was taught, the lesson she recited, the story Aleksander didn't bother to correct back then. And she remembered his nightmares, the darkness. His mood was crumbling, the brightness of his eyes replaced with something heavier and deeper. Sadness, and grief that seemed so old, and yet, somehow still alive. Alina approached him, feeling a different kind of tension, feeling like a moment of truth was upon them, unavoidable. She stepped close, close enough to grasp his hands and look at their joined fingers and then up, into his eyes.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

He nodded. "I will. But I would like to go outside."

They made a slow walk through the hallways and then outside into the gardens, partially lit by the light of the party streaming through the windows. Aleksander found a bench where they sat, Alina close to him to ward off the evening chill.

"He did not take me as an advisor," Aleksander said. "I offered myself, because I was desperate. Everyone I knew, everyone I cared for was hunted. Ravka was a different country - the Grisha had to run because their neighbors would turn them up and they'd be slaughtered. Burned on stakes or killed in front of their families. I thought - I hoped - if I could make myself useful to the King, then he would stop it all," he paused. "He did not. After I kept my end of the bargain ..."

The way his voice seemingly gave out prompted Alina to cover his hands with hers.

"Is that why you created the Fold?"

He shook his head. "No. Well, yes. But ... He... he killed someone. He ... sent his soldiers after me, to my home, where my -," he paused, blinking away the tears. Alina did not speak, did not interrupt him or ask him to go on. "To my home. I... had someone. Loved someone. And she loved me and -"

"Luda," Alina said, realizing what had to happen. "They killed her in front of you."

He nodded. "All I wanted was an army of my own, Alina. All I wanted was to *defend* my own. I tried to do it with Merzost, I wanted to convert the King's army as my own, to obey me... But I created The Fold instead."

She didn't know what to say - it wasn't what she expected at all, the story of The Fold's creation seemin somehow hollow, pointless, too simple - *too human* . Aleksander continued his telling, his eyes distant and wet with grief that seemed as old as he was.

"I *detest* them, *all* of them, their fabricated, made up nobility, their wasteful behavior, their greed... and among it all, complete disregard for the suffering of everyone else," he said in a heavy voice. Alina thought how she could feel it as well, for she had seen it with her own eyes - the refugees, the people who had lost their homes and had nothing, apart from what the Grisha and Second Army gave them; the war that was draining the country - and all the while the royal family too busy with its luxury and self importance, not caring and not wanting to care about anyone else, anyone lesser than them.

"And yet you have to play their game if you're to achieve anything," Alina said, slowly standing up. She stepped in front of him, between his parted knees, so he had to look up to see her face. "And that's so frustrating and tiring and I don't really know how you kept it up for all these years. Decades?"

"Centuries," he said as she stroked his hair at his temple, her fingers trailing down to touch his beard. "All for the semblance of safety - and only if we serve as his cannon fodder," he said, as he leaned his forehead against her sternum. She stroked his hair, his neck and let her thoughts play out, realizing now why he did what he did after she had run away. She realized, bitterly, how little she was taking into account, how naively and impulsively she acted, and while his actions weren't okay, she could see his intention. And for that, she couldn't fault him, but what was done was done. If this game had to be played, then they would play it together.

"Tell me, General," she said lightly, purposefully keeping a teasing tone in her voice. "Would you go back to this ... rather tedious party and dance with your wife?"

*

Leaving was the best part of the night, leaving the Grand Palace, leaving to go back home. Alina was tired, her nerves unsettled by the entire night, by the attention she had to endure from people who weren't friends or allies, but who looked at her and Aleksander as something they wanted to get rid of. She went to her chambers followed by a maid and asked for the help to undress and put the beautiful dress away. She untied the corset herself leaving her in a simple shift as she sat to free her hair from the subtle headdress and many pins that kept her braids in place.

That was how Aleksander found her, working on undoing her hair, when he was already comfortable, in his bedclothes. She watched him approach in the mirror, his movements soft and subdued, his eyes hesitant.

"Let me help?" he offered when he was near, near enough that she could see the light of her lamps reflecting in his dark eyes. She hesitated a beat and then nodded. He stepped behind her, placed his palm on the back of her neck, and it lay there, warm and heavy for long moments, his thumb caressing, disappearing into her still bound hair. Alina sighed as he started pulling out her hairpins, unbraiding her hair, setting it free, feeling as he was undressing her, laying her bare for his eyes to see. His fingers combed through her hair as she tried to calm her breathing, anticipation buzzing in her veins. Unable to hold out any longer, unable to resist, she grasped his hand and looked up at him, finding unspoken emotions in his eyes. She stood and before he could speak, she decided to let him know what she wanted without any shred of doubt - standing on her toes she kissed him lightly, her lips parted long enough for him to understand her intention. He kissed her back but he didn't move, not until she gently tugged at his hands and pulled him with her, towards his bedroom and his bed.

"Alina," he said, a question in his voice and she looked at him, his lean and tall figure, his familiar face.

"I want something," she said then, stepping so close that she spoke the words into his chest, against his heartbeat. He cupped her face with both hands, tilting it up so he could see her eyes. He kissed her, her lips parting hers and it felt like fire.

"Tell me what you want, my sweet," his voice was heavy in her ear, filled with the promise of sinful things, as he kissed along her neck. She placed both hands on his chest.

"I want to touch you," she said and watched his subdued smile and the desire in his eyes. He kissed her again, bolder this time, inviting, prompting her into action, calling her hands to pull up his nightshirt and find home on his skin. He tugged her to him, to climb on the bed and sit on his lap, so she was slightly above him, his face against her neck, her hands on him, tracing his shoulders, seeking his scars as he held her close and kissed her breathless. She pushed him down then, to lay on the pillows, darkness and lust mixing on his face as she kissed him. She traced the planes of his chest, touched the scar over his heart, she teased the muscles of his stomach, her hand going lower, sliding below the waistband of his pants as he held his breath. He closed his eyes as she finally grasped him, half hard with anticipation from her teasing. "Sasha," she said, so he would open his eyes and look at her, his gaze unfocused, intense, *indescribable*.

"Milaya," he moaned, seeking out her lips.

"Show me," she said.

"You... you don't have to -"

"But I *want to*," she told him, their gazes locked.

He reached with his hand, shoving his pants away, and then reached for her hand, wrapping his fingers around hers. "Milaya," he said again, and she kissed him, feeling how his other hand kept her close, locked in a kiss as he moved his hand with hers, teaching her, letting her in on the secrets of his body, of his pleasure. She could feel it keenly, their bond like a livewire between them, his pleasure filling her veins, his flesh hot and hard in her hand. He was there, completely hers, giving himself to her to command him, to *unmake* him; reaching his peak and spilling over his stomach and their joined hands.

"*Oh*," she gasped against his mouth as he was catching his breath and then pulling her into a white hot kiss. Suddenly she was under him, and he was reaching for the hem of her nightdress.

"I want to touch you," he said, his voice hot. "Will you let me, my sweet?"

Alina nodded, feeling the warmth of his hand on her thigh, through the thin material of her dress. He moved it away, enough to slide his hand under, to seek out her hip, her ribcage, her breast. She had to close her eyes against the feeling of his thumb on her nipple, then his entire hand closing over her breast. He kissed her then, hot and hard and intense as his hand moved down, over her stomach and between her legs.

"Is this okay?" he asked and she breathed her consent and spread her legs. She touched herself before, but his hand was different, his fingers much bigger, rougher than her own, seeking out her wetness and slipping inside. All Alina could do was moan and give in, just as he did moments before, finally letting go, letting herself go, moving her hips into his hand and making dirty little noises against his mouth, her hands holding onto his shoulders, her body under his command. The tension built inside of her and she felt as if she was filled with brightness, with the burning light that was about to burst through her skin, until she reached her climax, white tide overtaking her.

Only when it all passed, when the spasms of her body subsided did he pull his hand away from her, bringing her body against his and kissing the crown of her head.

"My love," he said then, "My little wife."

"My husband," Alina whispered, breathing hard against his naked chest.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I think I should give up all pretenses that at this point I am capable of writing anything but this story. Anyway. I had time to write.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was an arm around her bare waist, pulling her, and legs tangling with her own, and that was how Alina woke, the feeling of skin against hers, her shift ridden up during the night. If her reason would protest, her instinct seemed quicker, and she just turned to face the man laying behind her.

“Alinochka,” he said as she studied him for a moment before she moved to lay against his chest.

How was this suddenly real? She didn’t care, she chose not to care, not to give into the guiltling thoughts in her mind. When he cupped her cheek to kiss her, she opened her mouth, and when he pulled her over him, to straddle his thighs, she went. He was still bare, without anything on, just as she undressed him last night, all soft skin and strong chest under her fingers. He teased her through the fabric of her shift as he kissed her, his hands on her waist, her breasts, her clavicle, the touch lighting her up. But it was not enough, the fabric of her nightdress robbing her of the feel of his skin, of the look in his eyes if he could see all of her - and because she wanted to see him seeing her, because she wanted that look on his face for her and her alone, she straightened, stilling over his thighs, and pulled her nightdress off.

She watched his eyes, wide and dark, filled with desire, his thick swallow, the movement of his throat as he rose himself to sit up, his hand above her breast, his breath stuttering. In that moment she knew she had the power, she knew that he was *hers*, that she could ask and command and he would comply. She placed her hands on his shoulders, sliding one palm along the back of his neck as he stared, reverently, and finally put his hands on her. She claimed his lips and kissed him, wet and slow and dirty, playing with his hair, stroking under his ears, sliding her palms down his back. Last night she was fumbling, painting herself braver than she was, right now her hands were moving with knowledge, her lips parting with intent as she felt him getting hard between her legs, pushing against her wetness, a moan tearing from his throat.

“*Milaya, ljubavi moja*, oh how I want you,” he said, his beard scratching against the skin of her shoulder.

“Then have me,” she said, no thoughts, just desire in her mind. “Have me,” she said, sure, deliberate, nodding when he did, looking at his lips just before he claimed her mouth anew. He kissed her breathless and laid her beneath him, his hand massive on the skin of her stomach, his mouth on her neck, on her clavicle, kissing the point where the antlers pierced her skin, sending shivers and heat through her, calling for her light to rise and meet him. When his lips closed over her breast she nearly cried out, arching off the bed when he entered her with a finger. All she could do was ride the tide of her pleasure, trying to hold onto it, the delicious, agonizing feeling of him stroking her, kissing her, his slick tongue and raspy beard, of the sweet, dirty words he was saying; how wet and tight she was, how amazing she felt, how he wanted to fuck her, how beautiful she was. She came and felt like she was dissolving, like the light was erupting out of her every pore, like she was shooting up in the sky and would never come down - but she did, of course she did, breathing heavily against his lips.

“So amazing,” he said, his hand still in place, still inside of her, teasing her lightly, bringin on aftershocks through her, making her want him again. He kissed down her neck, between her breasts and along her stomach, until he was between her legs, his fingers on her, spreading her open. The feeling of his mouth on her was almost too much, a sweet agony, a torture she didn’t want to end. Suddenly she reached a climax again, coming against his mouth, his hands on her thighs. He remained on her, his mouth on her folds until she was done shuddering, and then crawled up her body to let her kiss her wetness on his lips.

She felt spent and loose, sated and boneless, smiling stupidly as he kissed her. She could feel him nudging against her, his hardness against her folds.

“You haven’t been with a man before, is it true, *milaya*?” he asked, his eyes caring and tender. She shook her head.

“No. Not like this,” she said.

“Do you want it? Do you want me?” he asked, kissing her softly, and she could feel a wave of white-tight excitement, of anticipation, wondering how it would feel, to have him inside of her, to join herself with him, completely, properly, as a husband and wife should.

“Yes. Yes, I want you,” she said and he was entering her, slowly pushing inside, her body giving way, stretching, adjusting as he kissed her. And then she was breathless, her breasts brushing against his chest, moaning as he slowly moved inside of her, the feeling of it so intense.

“Does it hurt?” He asked, teeth scraping against her skin lightly, his voice dripping like honey.

“Just... just a little bit,” she said, the discomfort so slight as he kissed her.

“Should I stop?” he asked, even though she saw and *knew* and felt that he needed this, *wanted* this, that he needed his release, and she badly wanted to give it to him. She shook her head and kissed him back, swallowing his moans, relishing the feel of him inside her body, winding her arms under his, grasping his shoulders, her thighs parted, his muscles tense under her hands. He pulled himself up so he could touch her between her legs, making her eyes roll back, making her moan and scream as the pleasure in her started building again, the feel of him moving in and out so intense. He was telling her how perfect she was, how beautiful and his, how tight and wet for him, how he loved fucking her, his voice strained and movements erratic until he clutched her thighs and shuddered, then falling forward over her body as his climax went on and on. “*Milaya*,” he said, breathing hard and slowly pulling out, pulling her to him. “How are you?”

“Good,” she said, “and, oh, *wonderful*,” she added, kissing him. “Happy.”

He held her against his chest, one hand in her long, wild hair.

“I am happy that you’re happy,” he said. “And I am just - just happy.”

*

Later, when Alina arranged her hair in some semblance of order and changed her clothes, so she could go down to the kitchen and find her coffee, she felt that anyone could see on her very face what she had just done with Aleksander in his bed. But in reality Fedyor greeted her cheerfully and Ivan gave her a short nod and her cup of coffee, and she returned to Aleksnader’s rooms, their rooms, where breakfast had just arrived.

And she sat down to eat, but not until her husband - *her husband* - kissed her deeply and thoroughly before he took his seat, near enough to hold her hand over the table.

The breakfast went in a content mood, with him openly showing affection, calling her tender little names or kissing her hand - and that was how Ivan found them, for Aleksander had forgotten to close the door. He paused at the obvious display of affection, breath slightly caught and his face carefully composed before he gave a formal greeting.

“Ivan,” Aleksander said, “Is it something important?”

“I’m afraid it’s quite important *moy soverenyi*,” Ivan said, holding a neatly rolled parchment in his hand. “It’s a report from Monseno region,” he said, approaching, and offering Aleksander the rolled paper. “There has been another attack.”

Alina saw how Aleksander tensed - how his expression changed, his face becoming sharper, turning more grim as he read on. When he finished he handed the report back to Ivan, whose already grim expression turned even more grave.

“This makes matters worse,” he said. “On second thought, leave this report with me.”

Alina looked between the two. “Should I leave?”

Aleksander gave her a long look and then shook his head. “No. I was going to tell you about this, so I might do so now,” he looked at Ivan. “I will have to go and report this to the Tsar, but for the time being keep this quiet. I want to think it through, because the Tsar will demand a decision” Aleksander said.

After handing back the report, Ivan left and Aleksnader rubbed his eyes for a long moment, before he looked at Alina.

“Can I somehow help you?”

He stood, walking slowly towards the other part of the room, the big and colorful War table, filled with reports and charts, mountains and borders and tiny soldiers. Alina followed, coming close enough so she could lean in and touch his back, trace the embroidery on his black kefta, still feeling the sweet ache between her legs.

“Monseno is a region near Ulensk, towards the Fjerdan border” Aleksander started, pointing with his hand towards a portion of his large strategic map. “A hundred years ago - more or less - a noble man from the area donated his estate to Sankt Vasilije as a penance. Sankt Vasilije turned it into a monastery and a sanctuary for all who were seeking peace and knowledge. The monastery is situated on top of a high hill - its previous, noble owner enjoying the isolation from the rest of the world. It’s a steep climb, and the terrain surrounding it is rough. To the monks living there, a pilgrim seeking their help takes the path up the hill as a part of the penance, after which they can enter the monastery and seek their peace and enlightenment. The legend says that one part of the climb is so narrow, but nobody ever fell from the cliff. In any case, the monastery, with its vast library, is difficult to access and gives a rather good vantage point on the valley surrounding it.”

Aleksander paused, walking to the other end of the table with parchment maps all neatly rolled together. He found one and unrolled, beckoning Alina to come closer and take a look.

“There are two conditions for those who enter the monastery. They have to stay at least for a year, and they have to take a pledge of silence.”

“Silence?” Alina asked not sure if he meant what she thought he meant.

“No conversation. No sounds,” Aleksander said.

“Oh, I see,” Alina said.

“There are several villages in the valley. People from those villages visit the church of Sankt Vasilije several times a year. The monastery is important to the people in the area who regard Sankt Vasilije as their patron saint, their protector,” Aleksnader said, pausing his telling. “This I have told you, so you would understand the context.”

“One hundred years old monastery, founded by a saint who lived at the same time as the grandparents and the ancestors of the villagers did,” Alina said.

“Exactly. It’s important to their traditions, their identity, it belongs to them,” Aleksander spoke. “And now, the problem. For the past year and a half there have been reports of unusual Fjerdan activity in the area. One that would indicate that Fjerdans have found a place they’re using as a shelter.”

Alina froze, realizing where exactly this was going. She hadn't been in the army for too long, but these were the things any soldier was bound to understand. Aleksander continued his telling, aware that she was now making connections and forming suspicions.

"The Second Army has raided the villages several times. That didn't make us exactly popular in the area. Not that we were ever watched upon with benevolence. We have found nothing, however the attacks continued, the people were killed, the Grisha kidnapped. It left just one option -"

"The monastery," Alina spoke.

"Yes. For which I have no solid proof. Just suspicions. Regardless, the Tsar expects me to resolve this situation," he frowned, observing the map, his shadows lingering in the corners of the room. "Which means tearing down the monastery. Surrounding it on the outskirts, sending just a few people to set the explosives and -"

He didn't finish and he didn't need to, and in his expression Alina saw how much he loathed the very thought of it. She was not surprised but she still felt shock and outrage at the thought - destroying something as important and worthy? Without any actual and solid proof?

"But why? Couldn't you raid the monastery, just like you did with the villages?"

"It would be too hard, to get an adequate number of soldiers up there, over the rough terrain. The weather is cold and harsh through much of the year, and if there are Fjerdans hidden up there then I would be sending an entire unit to their deaths."

"Defending an uphill position gives you an advantage, yes."

"I cannot spare as many troops to create a siege. Besides, the people living in the area would turn on us, no matter what the truth was. And thus, I don't have too many options," Aleksander told her.

She could see it - all tiles neatly stacked, leading towards an outcome that was highly unfavorable. "If I tear down a monastery, a symbol of peace and hope for the people in the region, I will prove I am a monster that rumors paint me to be. If I fail to act and the monastery really is a hiding place for Druskelle, then I am proving to be an incompetent leader. And thus I need to pick a lesser evil, and I think we both know which one that is."

Alina did know. The show they had to put on for the royal family and Ravkan nobles for the past four days was nothing compared to the decision he was forced to make right now.

"And I don't like it. I don't like it because all my instincts are telling me I am walking into a trap," he said, staring at the War Table, at the figures of the mountains and soldiers scattered around in a pointless and bloody dance. "It's too neat. Too ... simple. I have a feeling that something is missing."

Alina came close, pressing herself against his side, sneaking her arm around his waist.

"Do you have to make this decision now?"

"No," Aleksander said. "I will re-read all the reports, including this new one. In hopes that I have missed something before, something that will give me a clue."

"Well I could help you with that," Alina offered. "But first, why wouldn't you try to clear your head? Why not go for a walk? Or a ride?"

Aleksander smiled. "You know, I would have just kept on going without a pause. But you are right. A short break might prove to be a good remedy," he said.

*

They took a walk through the gardens later, after Genya arranged Alina's hair and mentioned how her face did not need any tailoring, for she was literally glowing - however, a bite mark on her neck was another story. Alina blushed through it all, and Genya just smiled in return.

"You will tell me when you're ready," she said. "Also, Alina? You might want to ask the healers about a contraceptive tonic. That is, if you don't want to be pregnant very soon."

Alina was thinking about that as they walked through the gardens - the first flowers slowly starting to bloom. Aleksander held her hand most of the time, sometimes bringing it up to rest at the crook of his elbow, sometimes kissing her knuckles and looking at her like he would want nothing more but to return to his bed, their bed.

"What made you so pensive, *solnishka*?" he asked, pulling her to stand close to him.

She opened her mouth and closed it, not sure how to start - she didn't want to bring Genya into the conversation, wanting to focus on what she thought and what he would tell her.

"Sasha?" she looked up, her glance passing around them, not wanting to have anyone overhear what she was going to ask. "Are we should we... -"

"Should we what?"

“Children,” she said, her heart speeding up. “A family. We - what if I get pregnant? I mean, I could -” She observed how his eyes widened, how his expression softened as he probably recalled what she too was recalling. “Can we even do that? Is it possible with everything -”

He pulled her closer, to kiss the top of her head. “Would you want that, *milaya*?”

Alina leaned her face against his chest. “I don’t know. Maybe, yes? Some day, some day, I think I would,” she felt his hands tighten where he held her arms and she felt a smile overtaking her, matching a smile of his own when she looked up to see his face. “But what if it happened right now? I haven’t been drinking any tonic, and I didn’t plan for us -” she could feel that she blushed and she could see that full blown, wonderful smile on his face as he realized what she was asking. What if their lovemaking this morning resulted in a pregnancy?

“Then you would be cherished and taken care of and I would be happy, so happy,” he said, kissing her forehead. “But only if you wanted this, *milaya*.”

She watched him, searching her heart and her mind for an answer that was truthful - for herself and for him; she remembered his body over hers, how he kissed her, how he cherished her. What if those moments resulted in a child? She tried imagining not wanting it, and she couldn’t.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I would want that.”

Chapter End Notes

I borrowed few things from history for this chapter.

*during WW2, in 1944, the Allies were trying to break through German defense lines in Italy and reach Rome, from the direction of Sicily. To achieve that, they had to cross so called Gustav line which went through valleys dominated by Monte Cassino monastery. It was founded in sixth century by St. Benedict and it was a protected historical site. During the fall and winter of 1944, suspicions arose that Germans were using the monastery as their base/hiding site. The monastery was situated on a hill, was difficult to approach and strategically it looked like a perfect spot to be used as a hiding place/base of operations.

At this point of the war, Allies were ordered not to destroy historically worthy sites, except if it was strictly necessary. For couple of months there was back and forth between USA and other Allies if Monte Cassino should have been destroyed. Finally the pressure from the public and allied forces grew so much and led to the decision to bomb the monastery, which was done, however soon after the German attacks continued - proving that the monastery with its library, sculptures and art was torn to the ground in vain. I picked this and tried to incorporate it into the story mostly because it shows how in war you’re forced to make decisions by picking lesser evil, in order to minimize the damage, and then find out that the entire thing was a mistake.

*Saint Basil of Ostrog (Sveti Vasilije Ostroški) is a Serbian orthodox saint during 17th century under Ottoman empire. He was buried in Ostrog monastery in Montenegro, and his tomb is a pilgrimage site to this day.

*there are several roman catholic and orthodox orders where the monks take a pledge of silence.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

In this house we don't like Baghra. Enjoy the new chapter!

"This isn't going to be very quick," Alina said, observing the War table covered with stacks of documents, maps, notes, newspaper cut-outs. Aleksander came back from his study, his hands carrying a large wooden box filled with more correspondence, his muscles obviously strained by the weight. " *Oh* ."

"Daunted?" he asked with a half smile, setting the box on the table.

"What are those?" Alina asked, nearing to see it better, but she didn't really need an answer. She saw folded papers and envelopes and felt a painful pang in her chest.

"Various personal letters. Everything that's sent from the front is copied and redacted," he explained, taking his kefta off and rolling up his shirt sleeves, as if he was going to commit himself to some arduous physical task. Alina had a passing thought about how attractive the gesture was - how sure and confident, his fingers methodical - but then something else crossed her mind.

"Of... course," Alina said. She was realizing that she was actually aware of that; that every single piece of writing leaving the battlefield was carefully checked, that crucial information couldn't be sent just about anywhere. And then she realized that Aleksander, keeping her letters to Mal, and Mal's to her was not quite as strange or sinister as she had thought. Nothing out of the ordinary, in fact, even if it felt terrible when she found out about it, but also, it wasn't the entire story of what happened.

There was a knock on the door. Alina sighed, deciding to put her thoughts of past aside, opened the door to let Ivan, Fedyor and Genya in. Ivan brought a big pot of coffee, which was not a terrible idea in the slightest, while Fedyor carried a big tray filled with sweets.

"I don't recall ordering food," Aleksander observed even as he took the nearest slice of madjarica after Fedyor set the tray on the table. He had a particular liking for sweets, a notion so endearing and quite incompatible with the idea of the strict and cruel Black General.

"I did," Alina said sweetly, not missing an amused glance that Fedyor passed to Genya. Her gentleness for Aleksander wasn't going unnoticed, and she knew for a fact that it wasn't noticed solely by their inner circle, but a lot more people. That too had repercussions she wanted to think about. "If we are going to go through all these," she gestured all over the table, "we deserve some sustenance."

"You could have ordered a broth," Aleksander said, licking his finger and looking her in the eye. Alina remembered what he did to her with his mouth this very morning. She couldn't think about that either, keenly aware how easily her desire came, how her body started to buzz, the feeling reminding her of her light filling her veins. She had to distract herself if she was to accomplish anything this evening, so she set out to find cups suitable for coffee. She deemed that Aleksander's fine gold and green teacups would do just fine.

"Tedious work requires a reward, and broth certainly isn't one," Alina replied, bringing two cups to Ivan. He gave her a half smirk and poured the coffee, for her and for himself.

"I must say that I agree," he said, unusually relaxed. Perhaps he could be pleasant and even funny, if one got to know him sufficiently. Perhaps he just enjoyed working. Whatever it was, the mood in the room was light, and yet Alina was failing to feel in the exact same manner.

"Thank you Ivan. For the coffee and for being the voice of reason."

The group was about to start working.

"This is the entire correspondence with our troops stationed in Monseno region, dating two years back," Aleksnader said. "Literally everything - form supplies requests, acquisition forms, lists of equipment, weapons, private letters... everything."

"And we're looking for -?" Genya asked, eyeing the nearest stack of documents. Alina made a mental note of Aleksander's thoroughness, of how he wasn't letting a single detail slide unnoticed - and how he applied the same approach to everything. She wondered if he had always been like this, or were there costs dearly paid because of the things that slipped unnoticed.

"Anything that might seem odd, or out of order, or not normal or usual -" Aleksander said, bringing a stack of documents to Fedyor. "If you find anything, just say so, and we'll take a look, all of us."

The group set out to work. Aleksnader was reviewing letters and reports from the officers, making notes, while Ivan and Fedyor worked on supplies lists. Alina and Genya decided to go through personal correspondence.

It was slow work. Some letters were barely readable, faded or written in untidy, hard to read handwriting, some were mentally difficult to read, telling about fear and sadness and longing for home. Alina had started her task with enthusiasm, making notes on a parchment in front of her, who wrote and when, what did they write about, but the longer she read, the more pensive and sad she became. Her mood became sullen and she was trying not to show it. The men were making similar slow progress and after two hours, Aleksnader decided it was time for a break. The evening was starting to set in and no matter how much Ivan claimed he could go through an entire stack of forms requesting supplies, he too was tired.

"Not tonight, Vanya," Fedyor said, rising from his chair and stretching. "I need some air, and to let all of this information settle before we continue tomorrow," he added with a smile. Ivan just sighed.

"You lazy, unenthusiastic lot," he said.

"I agree with Fedyor," Genya added. "Better to work at a somewhat slower pace and thoroughly check everything. We will be done in a couple of days anyway."

The three of them left after that. Alina observed the mess left on the War table, the soldiers and maps moved aside in favor of the documents. Aleksander approached her, setting his hands on her shoulders, gently kneading her muscles. Everything that was tense within her started to loosen up, all the discontent fading away. She leaned into the feeling of comfort, deciding not to resist it. She didn't think about if she should trust him any more, because it was self-evident that she did, and the only thing left to worry about was if he was going to misuse that trust, but even that thought seemed so far away, and quite frankly, Alina did not want it anywhere close. When she looked at Aleksander, when he touched her, when he smiled, she saw a man who called her his sun and his soul and his love in ancient languages she was still learning - and yet when he'd said it, she knew what he meant.

"I could use a bath," Alina said. She needed to calm her nerves, thinking of those lovely bathing salts sitting on a cabinet in her bathing chambers. She could pin her hair up and soak until the water turned cold and then just go to bed, relax and let her mind wander, or perhaps read something nonsensical, one of those romance novels that Genya and Nadya brought her.

"And I need to go down to the Fabrikator's workshop," Aleksander informed her. He approached, he smiled sweetly and kissed the top of her head. "You have your bath... and I shall hurry back."

"You do that," Alina told him, the desire she felt and squashed in favor of work returning almost immediately. Once she had touched him and made love to him, she wanted more. "I'll... be waiting," she added, watching his face turn vulnerable, surprise hidden in his dark eyes. She wondered if she could trust him and forgot that he had to be wondering the same - that when she left he had to be hurt. Just before he could leave she pulled his face to hers, a mirror to his own actions back then - she kissed him, with sweetness and promise, romance novels all but forgotten.

*

Alina had her bath, trying to get her mind off the letters she read, but to no avail. They were dated almost two years ago and Alina wondered how many of those soldiers, if any, were still alive. How many of them would never see their home again, and if any of them would ever know a world where there would be no suffering and no war.

She sat in the slowly cooling water, her mind distant as she thought of her conversations with Aleksander from before - of how she could turn the tide of the war, how they could change the world together, of hope for the future, for Grisha and Ravkans alike. She remembered that day so well, the elation of the beginning, and being nervous, helping him into his kefta, kissing him - and she remembered its broken, devastating end, wondering what could have been different if she talked to Aleksander then, instead after he caught up with her; after he decided everything was lost. She wondered what it was that *everything* entailed.

In her mind destroying the Fold was the ultimate goal. It was what he told her, what he let her believe, allowing her to build her strengths around that ideal - Alina wondered if she would see the truth, the infinitely complex situation they were all in, would Aleksander lead her to see it - and if that was manipulation that Baghra was talking about. She believed everything was far more simple than it truly was. In reality, the truth had more than just one face. As Genya said, one man's hero was another man's enemy. In reality, she saw Aleksnader's effort at the court up close, learning how much energy and knowledge it required to placate the Tsar. Once, she viewed Grisha as show offs, cruel and disdainful members of the military upper class who had better meals and equipment, now she knew the price each Grisha had to pay for that.

Alina got out of the bath with a strange feeling in her chest, with heaviness and determination as she thought about it all - about herself and the title she had, the fact that she was but a pretty pretense right now. A summoner without ability to summon, a sankta without any power. She dried her skin absently, fastened the towel around her body and unpinned her hair, sighing. She was starting to go through her routine when her hand paused over a hairbrush with sunrays painted on the handle.

I cannot amplify something that isn't there, Aleksander said. And that, that was the truth. Alina knew that for a fact, thinking how the contact with him brought her power to the front, how that did not change a bit. The power was still in her, and if it was in there, and even knowing why it had been gone didn't matter - all she needed was a method to access it.

All she had to do was *think*, Aleksander said. She thought of him as she walked back to his rooms; she thought of how gently he coaxed her towards results. He wasn't here right now, she couldn't hold onto his hand, he wasn't here to tell her sweet words and distract her from her own doubts. She had to do it on her own. She couldn't let herself count on the notion that she would always be able to grasp his fingers and depend on him. So how should she do it?

Perhaps she could hold onto something that was his? There was a dressing drawer in his bedroom. She opened it with a vague idea of finding something with his scent. There on the top shelf, just slightly above her eye level was a familiar nightshirt. He wore it the night before, and when she pressed it close to her face she thought of the comfort of his embrace. Alina hesitated a little wondering if he might get offended at her taking his clothes - deciding finally that she would just borrow, just for a little while. Just for practice.

She let the towel she wrapped herself in fall from her body and pulled on the nightshirt that reached the middle of her thighs. There, she thought, a trick of her own. If she closed her eyes she could feel his scent, she could imagine his nightshirt was his touch. She padded to the bed, climbed in and sat in the middle, making herself comfortable, covering her folded legs with a blanket, trying to focus. She closed her eyes and let her thoughts drift, remembering the feeling of light, trying to wrap itself around the notion of it. Her mind was filled with Aleksander and everything

he was telling her - that each summoning was like a breath, natural and hers, that her power was still there, that it would come back. She thought of all the moments they spent in this bed, the quiet nights and easy mornings and moments when he touched her, as a husband and a friend and a lover, and she let herself be filled with the memory of him, gently, confidently, allowing herself to accept it, all that he was to her, what he'd become. With her mind at peace and her heart alight, Alina opened her eyes, opened her palm. She called and the light answered.

"That's lovely," she could hear his voice, hushed and excited and she nearly jumped, looking up from the pearl of light in her palm. Aleksnader was smiling proudly at her, standing at the foot of the bed, his fingers working on the buttons of his shirt. She closed her palms and pulled herself back, sitting against the headboard as he undressed. He was looking at her as if he still couldn't believe that she was there. When he pulled on a fresh nightshirt he came to bed, sitting across from her.

"Were you practicing?" he asked, the thin cotton making him look soft, the opening of his shirt taunting her with the view of his chest.

"I was trying to," she told him, observing his eyes and how he looked at her, appreciation and awe and subdued hunger mixing in his eyes.

"By stealing my clothes?" he asked, teasing.

"I borrowed," she told him, trying to read him, guess his reaction.

"This is some new recommendation on summoning practice? Steal your spouse's clothes?" he said, inching a little bit closer, a tiny smile playing on his lips. She pulled herself back, smiling back at him, wanting to explain how she wanted that tiny bit of assurance, and something that was familiar and certain.

"Perhaps I merely wanted... my spouse's closeness?" she said, suddenly feeling vulnerable, but continuing anyway. "And you see, he wasn't here -"

He looked at her with a held breath. This was about more than just his shirt or even her summoning.

"Alinochka... you don't need my hand to bring out your light," he was saying, sweetly, his hand resting between them on the covers. "It's yours -"

"Maybe I enjoy your hand," she was saying. Not thinking, just saying what came to her mind. "Maybe I want your hand," she added, breathless, her smile gone now, her eyes on his. "Maybe I want *you* -"

More than certainty, she thought. More than light itself.

"You can always have me, milaya," he paused, his fingers mere inches from her leg, his lips parted, inviting, promising.

"But?"

"I would like to see you try in earnest," he was saying, but his eyes were telling her something different, calling for her just like he called for his shadows and they came, his pull irresistible. "Come on, solnishka. I know you can -"

She touched her hands together, her eyes on him. "It's not working," she said, straight faced, pulling at the nightshirt she was wearing, over her head, and tossing it aside. "I think you really should touch me -"

"Oh," he said, sneaking his hand under the covers, fingers grazing bare skin, tickling her. She jumped, pulling backwards, a mock escape to his sweet assault. "Come on now," he whispered, his tone heavy and hot. "You said you wanted to be touched -"

He grabbed her leg and pulled. She squealed, helpless against his tickling, grabbing a pillow and hitting him with it.

"Oh that's how you wanna play?" he asked grabbing a pillow of his own and the fight ended up with him falling over the edge of the mattress. Alina laughed, a bright, unrestrained laugh as he pulled himself back up, all of his hair in disarray. "You laugh at me?"

She nodded, stifling giggles. "Yes -"

"You laugh at me?" he asked, trying to be serious and failing, laughter taking over him as well. He grabbed her in earnest then and they rolled over until she was under him, his knee keeping her thighs apart, his nose brushing against hers. She could feel her light, trying to tug itself free. "You wanted to be touched?"

She nodded, smiling into his smile, her eyes already drifting shut as his hand splayed over her ribcage and inched toward her breast.

"Why does it react like this to you? Like you light me up -"

"Because we're made for each other," he said like it was the first thing that came to mind, unplanned and simple like a breath, and he kissed her, lips and tongue and teeth. In a corner of her mind there was a thought, a distant thought of a voice that warned her this was how he manipulated naive young girls, however Alina gave in, both hands on his face, her thighs falling apart, unresisting as he pressed down against her, because she wanted this, and she wanted *him*. She didn't care how he found out about her favorite flowers, she cared that he *did it*, that he was here and that her body was burning for him in every possible way. She pulled and tugged at his clothes until he got rid of it and she could feel all of his skin against hers.

"Touch me like you did... at the Fete," she said, making him pull back to look at her and search her face. She was breathing hard, feeling him hard and ready against her wetness. She pressed herself against him.

"Alina?"

"I want...", she paused and fought herself for words that scraped and tore at the floodgates of her soul. "I want to have it all," she was saying. "I want you and I want -" *I want it all back* she thought, but her breath stuttered and her heart was beating against his chest as if it wanted to break out and join his own.

But she needn't say it, it seemed, because in the next moment he was kissing her without a doubt or restraint, the way she remembered, the way she craved ever since that moment was taken from her, pushing himself inside her, moving as if she was his, knowing that she *was*, because she was choosing to be. They fucked hard, loud, until he reached his peak, spending himself over her stomach, pulling her against himself then. She would have been content with this alone, the ache that resided inside of her finally made into something physical and real, a sweet echo of his presence between her legs; but then he kissed her, slow and long, with his hand seeking her wetness, teasing, touching her; sending her higher until she came too, her voice caught against his chest.

"Solnishka," he said later, long after they both calmed and just lay next to each other, each lost in the contentment of the afterglow. He didn't say anything else, and she found she couldn't either. She didn't want to touch and disturb the fragile equilibrium, a moment they've lost and taken back. Instead she moved, mindful not to touch any part of his body with hers, took a deep breath and closed her eyes, but just for a moment. Just to tell herself that this was okay, that it was where she belonged, that she was *allowed to belong here*. Then she opened her eyes, touching her hands together; opened her palms like she was holding water.

Come to me, she thought and a small sunrise burst against her fingertips.

*

The next day was mild and warm and beautifully sunny, perfect for what Alina had planned but wasn't able to do ever since Aleksander had fallen ill.

She and Fedyor had loaded a small cart with books, parchments, pencils and fountain pens, along with boxes of freshly baked pastries and dried fruit, fresh apples and candy Alina had ordered a week ago. One engineering unit of Second Army was tasked to repurpose a larger building in the refugees settlement as a school, and a word came two days ago that it was nearly finished and almost ready to be put into use.

Alina rode ahead of the cart, with Fedyor at her side and nobody else. She felt safe, content in her black kefta and with her title of a General's lady. It allowed her to make an effect, as if she was moving pieces across a game board: if she ordered that school benches needed cushions, because no child should sit on a cold hard wooden panel, those cushions appeared. The fact that it wasn't usual or customary was not questioned, because nobody was keen to get their answers from the General himself. It was a tiny bit of privilege that she used for others, not for herself.

When they arrived at the camp a group of children came running, almost knocking Fedyor down as he dismounted. Alina watched in amusement as the little ones pretty much hung on his kefta as he pulled sweets out of the pockets and everyone got a few.

Alina was shown the school building - the wood still needed to be painted and she wanted to decorate it, wishing for the rooms to be inviting and pretty. She still needed to find a suitable teacher for children who were about to be divided in two groups, according to their age.

The rest of the camp was starting to look like a real village, with a lot of people already working either for the Second Army or at the Little Palace. Ever since Igor was gone there weren't any incidents where someone else got hurt. The crops were starting to grow, the houses were looking more like homes and less like a shelter, and the overall mood was hopeful. Alina left the place feeling content, knowing that she made a difference, and that Aleksander aided her efforts while allowing her to do actual and significant work.

When they reached the Little Palace both she and Fedyor dismounted, deciding to lead their horses so that they could enjoy a conversation. Fedyor was telling about his family, about his parents and brothers and sisters, about his nephews and nieces and the presents he sent for birthdays, presents and letters he got for Koliada.

"I wish I could introduce you to them all," he was saying as they walked through the gardens and towards the stables when a darkly clad figure crossed their path.

Alina wondered dimly what Fedyor must have thought when her heart all but leaped into her throat, frantically beating at the sight of Baghra. His smile faded and he looked at Alina who put in a real and considerable effort to keep her face calm, impassive and emotionless like she had seen Aleksander do so many times. She did not move but Fedyor did as the old woman approached them. He stood on the right to Alina, his posture tensing up.

"I see that you are well, Lady Kirigan," Baghra spoke, her tone pleasant but her eyes anything but. "Do you truly need a watchdog at your heels?"

"Fedyor is not my watchdog," she said.

"Then he must be your husband's watchdog," Baghra continued. "For some things never change," she paused and Alina felt like her eyes were dissecting her, probing and poking and looking for holes in a delicate fabric of her new life. "I assume you now have everything you've ever wanted?"

"As you said... I am well," Alina answered, aware how her voice faltered, feeling as if she had been caught in a trap. The woman smiled, a dishonest little stretch of lips.

"And you are still a naive, foolish little girl -"

"You will not talk to Lady Kirigan in that manner," Fedyor interjected, a firm frown covering his unease.

“And how will you stop me, little heartreder? I trained and taught you. I know how you hesitate. You should have been a healer -”

“What do you want?” Alina asked but before Baghra was able to answer, everything around them started to dim and get dark.

“It doesn’t matter what she wants,” Aleksander was coming towards them in long, purposeful strides, looking like a thundercloud at the center of the shadows. As he approached Alina was able to see his face, his eyes full of anger and resentment, hurt and something she did not expect - fear. “Fedyor, leave us,” he said. “Take the horses to the stables.”

“Moy soverenyi -”

“She is just a sad old woman, Fedyor. Tend to the horses,” Aleksander said, taking a stand near Alina.

“What a lovely pair you make,” Baghra observed, her voice so detached and cold that Alina would have never guessed that once, a long time ago, she brought this man to life. That he was her child and that she nurtured him - if she even did that.

“Is that a compliment, mother?” Aleksander asked.

“It is not,” she said. “You got *exactly* what you wanted, didn’t you? Did you even bother to tell her?”

“Tell me what?” Alina asked, as Aleksander reached for her. She felt his shadows pooling around them both, she felt the turmoil of them inside of him, the desperation right beneath his fingertips as his breath sped up.

“As I said, some things don’t change,” she muttered, more for her own amusement than anyone’s benefit. “Does he still have to clutch your wrist so you could summon?” Baghra said, looking at Alina.

“How dare you -” Aleksander said, only to be interrupted.

“How sweet of him, isn’t it? He must be saying that he’s helping you along, you little fool,” Baghra looked at Aleksander then, her eyes aimed at him, but her words intended for Alina alone. “Did you tell her that you tied her to yourself three fold? By amplifier, merzost and marriage? Did you tell her what it would do, once your marriage was sealed and consummated?”

“Stop spewing your poison,” Aleksander said, a grave warning in his words as Alina held him tighter, feeling like a little pawn in Baghra’s hands - like they both had been nothing but pawns.

“Enough,” Alina said, fingers of her both hands curling around Aleksander’s bicep as he brought his arm closer to his body, and Alina moved to stand near him.

“Was it worth being seduced, in exchange for having your powers controlled? You *fool*. He married you when he could have bought you off the hands of West Ravkans,” Baghra said. “And you would have been free now.”

“She is not a *slave* to be bought. I married her as my *equal*,” Aleksander said, his voice low and dangerous. “And I suggest you stop. *Right now*.”

“I will stop,” Baghra retorted, “If you tell her, *right now*, why she cannot summon.”

“Who says I cannot summon?” Alina’s voice trembled.

“Can you?” pity and ridicule mixed with disdain in Baghra’s eyes. “Can you truly summon or is it just a laughing matter compared to what you could do? You handed yourself to him, and for what? For pretty words and a bed,” she continued to mercilessly pull apart everything that Alina held intimate and dear to her heart, everything that was just hers and Aleksander’s, and shouldn’t have been for anyone else to pry; the gentle, delicate moments she gathered in her soul pulled apart and trampled on, like broken, dead flowers on the ground. “I helped you run away and you ran straight back to him -”

“Because I *wanted* to,” Alina said, her anger rising within her. Something in Baghra’s demeanor changed, something in her gaze shifted as Alina felt her power, strong and clear just within her reach. “He did not seduce me. He didn’t need to,” she said, feeling the words in her heart as she spoke. He didn’t need to because she wanted him. She wanted him with all the good and bad, with the pain of the past and promise of the future.

“And he will make you a monster,” Baghra answered, cowering, pulling back as someone who was realizing that the battle was done.

“Or I might make him a better man,” Alina said, letting go of Aleksander and taking a step forward. How dared she take all of their life, all of their intimate moments to cut them apart so? Who gave her the right? Who gave her the right to tell Alina what her own reality was? The light bloomed at her palms, and Alina remembered something Aleksander told her - when you are in danger your powers rise to protect you, like on the skiff before she even knew what she was, like in that moment when she accepted the pain of the amplifier and the pain of Aleksander’s betrayal. They were hers and Alina knew, chose that this too was hers. “We can determine later who was right - but first, do you want to test *who exactly* controls what I can summon and how?”

Baghra stared at them both, furious and defeated.

“You are *both* monsters,” she said, and fled, as fast as her bad leg allowed.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

This is a completely self indulgent chapter, and probably my favorite one so far. Here are some answers you were curious about, and I hope you'll like it. If you want some music to go with this, try "I see the light" from Tangled. I don't care if that's lame.

Comments are loved and appreciated!

"That old, spiteful, horrid excuse of a -," Alina paused mid her tirade as Aleksander closed the door to the War room. He told Ivan that he had an urgent matter to attend to, and Alina had heard him as she stormed up the stairs. "I'm sorry, she is your -"

"No," he said and paused, mid breath as he looked at her. As if she would flee. "Don't apologize. You're not wrong," he said.

Alina felt anger - anger and confusion and frustration; she felt helpless as she realized, again and again, that the old woman somehow knew what was going on with her, with them, privately, intimately. She felt violated and she didn't know how it happened, how this was possible. She looked at Aleksander, wanting answers, seeing his own frustration and grief and fear underneath. She didn't want to feel like she was punched in the gut again and again, so without much thought she approached Aleksander and pressed herself to him, her face against his chest.

"I am so sorry," he said, and she thought that he wasn't apologizing solely for his mother's outburst.

"What are you sorry for?" she asked as she hugged him.

"For the way she treated you. Just now and -," he sighed, his breath stuttering. She could feel his tension rising, she could feel the fear again, the dread born out of loneliness that lived heavy on his shoulders for far too long. "For the fact that I allowed it."

She took a deep breath, a breath filled with his scent, familiar and safe as the first cup of tea in the morning.

"We need to have this conversation, Sasha," she said, feeling his hands tightening on her shoulders. She looked up, seeing turmoil of emotions on his face. "I need you to tell me. I feel like she is just mean, and is trying to hurt me. Hurt us," she said. He cupped her face, his thumb caressing her cheek, his expression too vulnerable not to address all of this as it should be.

"Some things she said are true. Some are correct. But almost all of them are twisted to her own purpose -"

With arms still around his waist, Alina looked at him seriously.

"So tell me. Tell me, because we cannot afford to have secrets. "

He led her to the fireplace, where she sat as he disposed of his kefta and started the fire. He found a bottle of brown colored drink, something that smelled rich and fruity, and poured a little bit both for himself and for her. Then he pulled another chair close to hers and sat, looking terribly tired.

"I need to tell you many things," he started, looking at the glass in his hand, as if looking at her was too much.

"I am here," Alina told him, and with that she fell quiet, quiet but present, to let him speak. Aleksander took a sip and then put the glass down on the small table between them.

"I think... I'll never forgive myself for not letting you know some things sooner. Before you went away," he paused and then he did look at her, a little lost, and filled with regret. "But if I did... I thought you'd think I was an enemy, and that was why I told you a part of the truth. I created the Fold, but right then I did not know what I was creating. Did I want it to cost so many lives? No, I wanted a means to defend myself. To defend all the Grisha. But once it was there, once it made a difference.... I put it to use to gain any kind of leverage for us that I could. And it took decades and centuries to build what I have built, and yet... we're still not safe. And I thought, I hoped... Some day, when the Sun Summoner comes, I would find him or her and have this person at my side. Unite our power so that nobody could ignore it, nobody would dare again strike against a single one of us. And... well. We know how that went."

"We do," she said pensive and sad, thinking of how his life revolved around this single goal; how lonely and frightening it had to be. How devastating to hang onto such vague hope, because he could not know if the legendary Sun Summoner would ever appear.

"I wanted to convince you to be on my side," he said, sighing.

"I would have been. I was. But then -"

"My mother told you I was just seducing you for your power?"

Alina remembered the night of the Fete, her demonstration, Aleksander standing near her podium, breathless. She looked down, and then back at him.

"I was never important," she started, because this was a time of confessions, and she was due on her own. "I was never special or ... or valued, or worth anything, really. I have - had a friend, I had Mal, but he..." she shrugged, remembering their youth, remembering herself as a young girl

who was not pretty enough to be smiled at or taken by the hand and kissed. She looked at the fireplace, content to be warm, to curl on herself in Aleksander's big chair and continue. "I was his little friend. He had other girls. We were drafted into the First Army and I was, I was just a mapmaker," she looked at Aleksander and laughed, remembering what she told him. "*I'm a mapmaker, sir*," she said and he gave her a tender, melancholic smile. "I was so frightened -"

"I know," he told her.

"And then even that insignificant life was turned upside down and I was lost. And then you... you kept telling me that I was important. That I mattered. That I could change the world, we would change the world and then I believed you, because you saw me. You saw *me*," she said, smiling and wiping away tears and Saints, it still hurt to remember. "I thought, I believed, I *wanted* you to see me. Because... I felt I had finally found my place. And then your mother -"

Her voice broke, but she made herself look at him, to share his heavy gaze. The sense of shared loss grounded her. She let herself watch his pain, she allowed herself to see it for what it was.

"I saw you," he whispered. "I see you -"

"And then you hurt me," she said, pressing on. Their conversation in his tent, when it happened, was heated and painful and she was trying to hurt him, so he would feel the same pain that she had felt. But that didn't make the pain go away; tricking him, stabbing him, thinking that they've killed him - until they've heard that the Darkling was alive and well - did not help. The pain was still there and alive, pulsing in her chest like a mirage of a heart. Alina seized it, held onto it and kept speaking. "And everything your mother was saying was true. And I didn't matter - I didn't matter *to you* -"

"Oh milaya," he said, his own eyes filled with tears. She was crying now, curled on herself in that big chair. "I am sorry, I am so sorry -"

"And I am too, and I wish, I wish it never happened," she said and wiped her tears, feeling like he was impossibly far. "Oh Saints, I can't take this any more -"

Alina got up on her unsteady feet and crossed the distance between two chairs, nearly collapsing into Aleksander's arms; and when he hugged her, when he held her she felt like her sorrows finally found a home, *she* had found a home, a safe place to let all of her sadness go. She cried, her face buried in the crook of his neck, his arms safely around her, their powers calm and joined together. If this was wrong, if this was seduction of the lowest kind, insincere and dangerous, then why did she feel safe? Why did he act so loving, so gentle? "I can't," she sobbed, "I can't live with doubts any more."

"Then you won't," he said, cupping her face, tilting it up until their foreheads touched, his eyes teary and tender. "I shall tell you the rest, I shall tell you everything," he was whispering, a promise, a wedding vow, a pledge.

"Yes," she said against his lips.

She took off her kefta and nestled against him, she let him unpin her hair and take off her boots. She was curled in his embrace and felt his every breath, and anything he had to tell her would be less of a burden because she wasn't on her own.

"You were gone and at first I didn't want anything," he was saying, his voice a whisper. "I found Ivan, and a few others and we made our way back here. And I didn't want to fight any more; I didn't want to deal with reports and the war and the skirmish attacks all along the border and the rumors that I was dead, and that you were dead.... but I had to, I had to, knowing that you were somewhere and that you hated me and - and -," he sighed and she could feel the shuddering breath in his chest, she could feel his pain. She stroked his cheek, the rhythmic motion soothing them both. "And then there were rumors. That you were in West ravka, that Zlatan was after you -"

"Zlatan?"

"A former general. One of our own. He sent an assassin to kill you at the Winter Fete -"

"The man who killed Marie," she said, stilling in his arms.

"You were in danger. And I had to find you," she could feel the tension rise again as he remembered, she could tell by the way his arms pulled her closer. "And then - you were caught."

She clung tighter to him as he fell quiet. She remembered it, distantly, but *she remembered it*, the pain and the fear and being hungry and cold and kept in the dark. Being kept from her light.

"I wanted to burn them all down," he was whispering, his words making her shiver, the way he said it and the way she felt it, and almost wanted it. "But then they'd hurt you. They had you and I had to play as they wanted, and at first they demanded ransom -"

"How did you get the treaty?"

"We captured their unit just a week before they captured you," he was saying. "And their request was meant to start negotiating. They offered you like a thing they owned. I didn't want you treated like a slave -"

"So that was the truth?" Alina asked and he just nodded, eyes closed.

"And then their commander offered a peace treaty marriage. And I had to pretend I would consider it, I had to pretend so they wouldn't know how much was at stake, but," he sighed and kissed the top of her head and held her like she was the most precious thing in existence. "But there was nothing to consider. It was the safest- safest way to get you back. It was a way to make you my equal in all ways," he told her, kissing her face again, sealing his words against her skin. "Because you would have my name, and with it all the power, and nobody would ever - ever - consider harming you. And I just - I just wanted you, I wanted you back and I *wanted you so badly* -"

"Oh, Sasha," she touched his skin, where his shirt was loose and open at his throat, sliding her fingers at the back of his neck.

"And then you hated me. Saints - I sent Fedyor and he told me he did what he could, and he told me you were weak but I couldn't even imagine," he paused, pressing his face against hers. "I negotiated the terms and you were there in a cell, hungry and alone. And when I finally saw you ... I wanted to create another Fold and suffocate them all, but then you'd only hate me more."

"I tried to hate you," she told him. "But I never could."

"I thought you did, I deserved it. So I just let you have your space, hoping you'd recover quickly, and I had no idea that you couldn't summon -"

"You didn't know?" she asked and he shook his head. "You didn't know -"

"No. But when you did tell me, I was worried. The healers told me that it was most likely because of everything you suffered. And I couldn't help you with that. So I... I worked and I tried to keep my distance, and take only what you offered... the refugees came -"

"And then you got sick," she said.

"I was certain you'd leave. I couldn't have stopped you if I tried," he said, bowing his head to her shoulder, near the spot where her amplifier lay under her skin.

"I couldn't, wouldn't leave you," she whispered into his hair. "I was so scared - so terrified to lose you. I couldn't possibly leave -"

"Milaya," he pressed his face against hers and kissed her; just a chaste touch of his lips to hers. "And when you stayed with me through the night... next to me, in my bed, I couldn't believe it was the truth. I kept... expecting you'd leave, after I got better. But you stayed and I would wake up with you close to me, and I could.... hold you, just for a little while, and, oh *how I wanted you* -"

She could hear it all in his voice, the longing, the devotion, in the sweetness of his words. All the yearning in his soul, that was for her. "And I offered to help you summon, because I wanted you happy. And healthy and whole. I wished, I *wished* to give back what I took. And you let me touch you, to help you bring your light... I never wanted it to end," he confessed, pressing his forehead to hers, rubbing his nose against her own.

"What was your mother talking about then? Did you... do you know?"

He took a deep breath. "It's a theory. It's a ritual, and I know that it exists, but I have never known anyone who performed it. Sacred union, binding yourself to your partner in promise, in power and a blessing -"

"Binding yourself three fold?"

"Yes," he said.

"But she mentioned merzost," Alina said, still confused. "Merzost is not a blessing," she said.

"It's not. But this is what my mother does. She twists things. My mother has spies among my ranks. Someone told her I had used merzost at the skiff, and someone told her you're sharing my bed. Your summoning, I think she guessed. And she's implying that I have bound you when I combined my power and yours, when I used the merzost after that and then, I married you. Three unions, but not really. I didn't use merzost on you. She failed to mention that the ritual is voluntary."

"What does that mean?" Alina asked.

"It means that I cannot take something that's not given to me," he told her gently, tenderly, slowly lifting his gaze to meet hers. "I cannot keep your light from you."

"She lied?"

"She used some truths to create a lie. She counted on your lack of knowledge. On your insecurities. So yes, she lied," he told her.

"I'm not bound to you the way she is implying?" she asked, because she needed to hear it from him, even though in her heart she knew. And he knew it too, he knew that she was now certain, for his shoulders relaxed and his eyes were clear.

"If you were, I would be able to control your light and you would be able to summon my shadows," he said. "And you would know it, you would feel it. But that is not so. And it's not true that you cannot summon. You can, and you will get strong again, stronger than me -"

"I don't want to be stronger than you," she told him.

"Oh?"

"No, I don't want it," she said, stroking his hair back. "I want us to be equal," she kissed him lightly and then lay back against his shoulder feeling as if she was finally able to breathe, content to be held, content to just breathe here and let everything they've said settle. At some point her stomach growled and her husband smiled.

"Am I starving you, my love?"

"Not on purpose, I presume," she said. "But I could eat something, only... isn't it a bit late to call for dinner?"

He nudged her nose with his, playfully, seemingly enjoying the simple gesture, his face more content than she had ever seen. "It's never too late to sneak into kitchens," he told her.

“Sneak into kitchens?”

“Mhmmm.”

“You sneak into kitchens?” she asked, incredulous and amused, never expecting him, the untouchable Dark General, to do something a five year old orphan would, on a rare day when cookies were baked.

“All the time. They keep hiding sugar from me,” he confessed, his smile growing wider. “Come on, it will be an adventure,” he promised.

*

And adventure it was, as they literally were sneaking, passing behind the backs of the maids and into the always warm space of kitchens, the scent of food pleasantly lingering in the air. The last of the guards probably had their meals. There was a pot on the stove, and Aleksnader went to inspect its contents.

“What did you find?” Alina asked, peeking into the pot. Aleksander found a spoon and offered her a bit of goulash he found. It was simple but delicious, hearty and still warm.

“Would that do?” he asked. She smirked, because he knew by now that she enjoyed food. Instead of answering she found the plates, letting him fill them with a generous amount of spicy meaty stew before they sat at the simple wooden table to eat. It reminded Alina of army tents and crowded First Army tables, it reminded her of Keramzin; it felt like some simpler life where expectations were lesser and any kind of danger was but a distant thought. A life she never had. A life she wanted, the closeness and warmth, a warm meal and a hand she could hold onto.

They found honey cake, eating it on their feet, and they had a walk. Alina kissed him in the middle of the gardens, and the entire world could see for all she cared.

“Whoever it was,” she said, “I hope they tell your mother.”

He laughed.

Later, they laid in bed, her leg still over his hip as he caressed her skin and they basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking. And she looked at him, she kept looking at him, his smile, his eyes, with the certainty of trust, peaceful with the knowledge of the past. He lifted his arm and she met his palm with hers, letting her light spill from her fingers, intricate and soft like a veil. He looked at it in wonder, looked at her in the same manner.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For not giving up on me,” she told him, letting the soft veil of light float above them. “For coming for me. For keeping your heart warm.”

He looked at her, long and soft before he pulled her closer to kiss her, tentative awkwardness now gone.

“My mother called it greed,” he said between kisses, as if he couldn’t get enough of her, of her taste and her touch. “And I guess it was. From the moment you told me I wasn’t alone, I got greedy. Greedy for *you*.”

She melted against him in another kiss, letting his words settle, earnest and needy, full of desire and devotion. And it was fine, it was perfectly okay with her, she thought as she opened her mouth against his, as he pulled her tight against his own body and she spread her thighs for him again - because she too was greedy, and she wanted it all - his power, his pretty words and the bed they shared. Everything they had and everything that was awaiting them still.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hello - here's a new chapter of what I like to think about as season two of this fic. I know that we have resolved the conflict that drove the first part of the fic (that being the conflict between Alina and Aleksander), which now leads to a new and different trial for the two of them - can they face the world holding an united front? I hope that this new story arc will be as interesting as the previous one was.

A warning before you head into this new chapter - there is implied child neglect and general cruelty towards the children in the text, typical for the assumed time period (18th century).

If you're reading this fic still, if you're enjoying it, please take your time and leave a comment and a reply. It means so much to me, and I would really like some feedback - which seems to have been declining through the past few chapters - and it's literally the only thing that a fic writer ever gets in return - a response from someone who read and liked their work. This is, probably, the most intense writing experience I have ever put myself through, and the reason why I share it (and why any fic writer shares their work) is to communicate with the people who read about the characters, the themes, emotions and words put into the fic. So please don't be shy and leave some words in return. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I feel like we've barely averted one crisis," Alina told Fedyor and Ivan as they hurried towards the main gate where their horses awaited them. "And there's already another."

Alina pulled her kefta tighter around her body, her feet hurrying after Ivan who pushed the big door open. Aleksander absolutely insisted for Ivan to come along after a report came - there was, supposedly, a problem with another child in the refugee village. Aleksander was busy with a meeting at the Grand Palace, which he could not get out of, discontent for having to let Alina go on her own. *I have no doubts that your judgement will be good. I am concerned for your safety*, he had whispered into her hair as he kissed the top of her head. In front of Ivan and Fedyor. Alina told herself that there was no reason for embarrassment, but she suspected there was a rather noticeable blush on her cheeks.

Ivan rode at the front, Fedyor and Alina following him. As they approached the settlement, which has become a true little village now, she felt her worries growing - what could have happened? Was there another incident, another child manifesting powers in some harmful way? Was a child sick? The note that Dimitri had sent was short and, she assumed, written in haste, and all it said is that he needed General's help.

They entered the village, and the activities there seemed nothing out of the ordinary. There was no mob gathered at the center, waiting for Aleksander and his company and Alina hoped that was a good sign. Dimitri did wait for them.

"Moya sovereniya," he addressed Alina, nodding briefly at Ivan and Fedyor. "I tried to resolve this by myself. But it doesn't seem to be possible," he told her, seeming discontent and apologetic.

"What happened, Dimitri?" she asked, sensing somehow that the current problem wasn't a potentially explosive situation, but rather a more painful one. He cast his gaze down, at his large, rough looking hands.

"Ekaterina Ivanova and her husband Pavel... they've taken Ekaterina's late sister's children, two girls. One girl, Natasha, she is seven, and the other, she is merely a babe. Ekaterina has been complaining that the wee one, Yana... " he paused, his discomfort obvious, but there was something else among his roughened features - pain.

"Did something happen to the baby?" Alina asked, regretting not bringing Sonya along. Ivan could do basic battlefield triage, Fedyor could do a bit more, but they weren't healers. If the child needed medical help -

"Oh, no, it is not like that. The baby - the little girl - Ekaterina wants to give her to you. She doesn't want her," Dimitri hurried through his explanation. "She says that the child causes plates to fall and windows open with the wave of her hand. That there's wind in the house -"

"She's a squaller," Ivan said, as Alina tried to gather her thoughts, feeling now a sharp pain of her own.

"She wants to give up the child, her sister's child, just like that?"

"She says she doesn't need -" Dimitri sighed, in a manner of a man who didn't want to deal with something he couldn't possibly solve. "The child is a Grisha, moya sovereniya. Is she not safer with you, then?"

Alina took a deep breath, feeling overwhelmed. The situation was quite clear, and the decision not difficult, but what pained Alina was the seemingly cold, callous treatment of a child. Dimitri fell silent and Alina could guess what else Ekaterina could be saying about her late sister's baby girl - that she is a thing, or a witch, or a monster, and she had no use for her.

"We should take the child with us, then," Alina said, taking a fortifying breath. There was no time for her own pains now - the little girl had to be taken into care and safety. "Take us there, Dimitri, please."

The walk was short but Alina did not pay attention to where she was going. Dimitri paused in front of one house, which looked no different than the others, and a woman came out, with her hair pulled into a bun, carrying a sleeping child. Another child came out, a thin little girl with dark red hair. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Take her," the woman said and gave the baby to Fedyor who was the closest. "I cannot care for her."

"Where will you take her?" the other child asked and before Alina could utter a word, the woman harshly berated her.

"Natasha, I told you to remain inside -"

Ekaterina was about to push the girl back into the house, when Alina spoke.

"Stop. That is her sister, is she not? She deserves to know," Alina said.

"Just take the babe. That's what you do, isn't it?"

"That's what we're forced to do," Alina said, "Because they are not safe on their own." Alina's voice was hard as she stared Ekaterina down. She wondered, briefly, how many children were put in Aleksander's arms like this, disposed of as if they were worthless, as if they were less than human, because their families did not want them? And how many were given up reluctantly, with endless pain and suffering, because their parents knew they couldn't possibly protect their children from the world that was so prejudiced and vile? Alina looked at the other girl, small and thin and dressed in scraps and remembered her own thin legs, her too big, leaking shoes, or pants handed to her by Ana Kuya, that were too short and she was always cold. "We will take her with us to the Little Palace. We have a place for her, for children like her," Alina explained. Natasha started to cry, big soundless tears of grief.

"Can I come as well? Can I? Take me too, please -"

"Hush and say not a word more! How dare you," Ekaterina said and roughly grabbed Natasha's shoulder. "You know you have duties here," she looked at Alina, furious. "Take the babe and leave us alone," she spoke and with that she pushed Natasha into the house and slammed the door shut.

Alina flinched.

"Saints," Fedyor said under his breath, looking at the baby, sound asleep in his arms. Alina swallowed, feeling something hot and painful tightening her throat. She looked at Dimitry.

"We'll need something to make a sling with," she said, regretting that they didn't take a carriage.

"It's okay," Fedyor said. "I can carry her like this. I've done it before and she is not too big -"

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," Fedyor smiled at her, then looked at the little girl. "Aw, would you look at her? Such sweetness, isn't she?"

Alina neared then, taking a look at the sleeping baby for the first time. She had to be about five or six months old, which meant she still nursed, which meant they would need a wet nurse. She had tufts of light colored hair and wonderful chubby cheeks. At least she wasn't starved, Alina hoped.

"Let's take her to the Little Palace," Ivan said, his own expression grim as well. "The sooner the better."

Their return was slower but still safe. Genya awaited them in front of the gate and as they dismounted, she neared Fedyor. "Just as I was suspecting. Oh Saints. That is a *baby* -"

"At least she will have no memory of this," Ivan remarked, gathering the reins of the horses, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"She is a squaller, as we've heard," Fedyor explained to Genya. "Want to hold her? My arm is a bit stiff at this point," he said and when Genya took the baby girl from him, he started rotating his shoulder and moving his arm about. He smiled nevertheless. "Her name is Yana and she slept through the entire ride," he said, sounding proud. Alina observed how Genya smiled, how even Ivan looked fond and thought how being brought here maybe wasn't the worst fate of them all. They already seemed like a doting little family with their tiny sister.

"Oh you're back already," Alina heard Aleksander's voice - he was coming towards them in long, swift strides from the direction of the Grand Palace, his eyes settling on Genya and the child she was holding. "Oh. I hoped -"

His face hardened as he approached. "A boy or a girl?" he asked.

"A girl," Alina told him, watching how he extended his own arms. "Yana is her name." Was this a custom of some sort? Alina observed how he took the baby from Genya with a strange tug in her chest. He smiled slightly, sadly.

"Yes, she is Grisha," he said, probably being able to feel the child's power.

"A squaller, as we were told," Fedyor said.

"We'll need a wet nurse for her, won't we?" he said to no one in particular, seemingly still mesmerized by the child in his arms and then looked at Alina.

"She is about five or six months old, so yes," she supplied.

"You weren't told how old she was?"

"No, she was... shoved into our hands, and the door was slammed shut," Alina said sadly. The baby squirmed, looking delicate and soft, a contrast to Aleksander's dark form. He gave the baby over to Alina - right up to that moment she wasn't feeling as eager to hold her, as Fedyor did, she didn't quite share Genya's happiness - but then little Yana's weight was placed into Alina's arms and she had to take a breath to keep her throat from closing shut with tears. For them, she was another Grisha child added to a community, something they were used to, or perhaps even

celebrated, and Alina realized for herself, Yana was an orphan, a child abandoned and discarded when it didn't have to happen. She suddenly felt angry, angry and sad in a way that was bone deep and hollow.

"Alina?" Aleksander said, his gaze searching. He knew her well enough and he knew she was upset. "I need to return -"

"I am alright," she told him to assure him, "We shall talk in the evening."

"Okay," he nodded. "See that the baby is taken care of. Ivan - send men to the city. We need to find someone who will feed Yana for the next couple of months."

Aleksander glanced at Alina once more and left.

"I shall go as well," Ivan said.

"Then let me take care of the horses," Fedoyr offered, then looked at Alina and Genya. "I shall see you both later."

Fedyor departed as well, leaving Alina and Genya with the baby.

"You seem very upset," Genya said. "Will you tell me what happened there?"

Alina sighed. "Yes. But let's get little Yana to the nursery first."

*

Genya brewed her tea strong and slightly bitter, and even though Alina preferred it mild, it was strangely comforting right now. She curled in her own chair, the fire crackling in the fireplace of her own room. Genya made herself comfortable opposite of her, drawing her feet up and curling like a cat. Alina stared at the fire and willed the heat from the cup in her hands to spread through her chest, as she told Genya what happened at the village.

"And then she just put Yana in Fedyor's arms - he was the closest - she wouldn't even let the other girl say goodbye to her sister. It was - cruel," Alina recounted. Genya's expression was as grim as Alina felt in her heart.

"As most of our stories are," Genya's hair caught the flickers of the fire-light. "I sometimes think how we are nothing but a country of orphans. In one way or another," she said. It gave Alina a pause.

"It's not... how I thought about it, but you're right," she said, her eyebrows knitting, intense discomfort spreading through her chest anew. The realization she was postponing as she avoided offering her arms to hold little Yana, the way her small weight settled against Alina's chest, the way Aleksander's eyes turned soft and sad even as he smiled at the baby girl. The way Yana's sister cried, the way each little orphan at Keramzin and no one to turn to, to soothe their tears - Ravka was a place of orphans, some small and some grown, but still carrying the scars left from lack of love and safety. Ravka was a country that did not love its children, and refused to protect them, except for a precious few. The noble ones sheltered by wealth and power, and the Grisha, desperately gathered here, hidden by the shadow of the Darkling, the man who extended his hands to hold a baby would be the same man to send that child, some day a grown woman, into the war. Maybe, at that point, she would leave a child of her own behind.

If only, Alina thought darkly, she could erect another Fold around each innocent child and force the claws of the world away from them.

"Alina?" Genya asked gently, and she shook herself, realizing just what she had thought.

"Just lost in thought," she said.

"A rather dark thought, by the looks of it."

"It was," she sighed. "Well. Maybe I am due to become more like my husband, whether I wanted it or not."

"And maybe he is due to become more like you," Genya replied, one eyebrow raised. "You do seem to have a tendency to look at the darkest deemed outcome possible. But -"

"But what?"

"The General has never smiled as much as he does now," Genya said and Alina scoffed. "Oh, no, do not do that. Do not underestimate your affect on him."

"You're just teasing me," Alina said.

"I am. But that doesn't mean I am not telling the truth. I want to help you feel better, for we cannot change the world as it is, not this instant, and not all of the sudden. But maybe, one child at a time, we accomplish *something*. And I do believe it matters, Alina. When you bring just one child to safety, you have done good, and you have done a lot," Genya said.

"I couldn't bring her sister," Alina said. "And I truly have no words to describe how badly I feel about that."

"That I believe."

“And it’s not just that I feel bad... it’s... I feel something bad is going to happen-”

Genya got up from her chair and knelt in front of Alina, offering her hand. Alina took it.

“I know that you are the Sun Summoner, but even you alone cannot save the whole world. That’s why you have the rest of us. To help you.”

Alina felt her eyes prickling and set down the cup of tea so she could pull Genya close and let her anguish dissolve inside of her friend’s embrace.

*

Fedyor sighed as he unrolled yet another report. “I swear my eyes are starting to cross,” he said, looking back up. The days were steadily becoming longer, but it was about the time for dinner and it was time to light the lamps. Aleksander was still gone, busy with the meetings at the court, along with Ivan. Alina wondered if he had eaten through the day at all, and when he would be back, comforting herself that she was doing everything she could on her end to help him. Going through the mass of reports was something he couldn’t commit himself to right now.

“Mine are starting to cross as well,” Genya said. It was Fedyor, Genya and Alina going through all the documentation of the Monseno region, and their progress was tedious and slow. “If some people actually knew how to write, it would make matters a bit easier though, Genya said”

“We need a break,” Alina said, putting down another letter that she was reading. She was done with all the personal letters, and now was reading the correspondence between the company commanders. “So far the only thing I’ve found are the wrong tallies of supplies that were ordered to what was actually needed.”

“Someone was selling the rest,” Fedyor said. “Sadly not an uncommon thing. And oh, everything we have tried to stop that from happening,” he added. “Do you still have that report?”

“Yes,” Alina said, finding the document easily, as she had set it aside earlier. “Here you go.”

Alina handed him a parchment and Fedyor studied it with a deepening frown. “But this is all weaponry,” Fedyor said. “I do not like this.”

“Perhaps that is a clue?” Genya asked.

“Could be,” Fedyor said.

“Do we know who wrote it?” Alina asked. “Because... that handwriting looks familiar.”

Fedyor studied the list. The signature was unreadable. “I do not know, but the General might. The list itself might have been written by a soldier, per someone’s order. We need to find out which unit this was... this was nearly a year ago,” he said, further studying the document. “It’s one thing when supplies are being sold. Food or tents or clothes. But this...”

“The General may be correct,” Genya said. “This entire situation might be a trap.”

“It might,” Fedyor concluded. “It indeed might.”

*

By the time Alkesander returned, the night had already set, heavy and unyielding over their world. Alina had her dinner alone, deciding to keep a plate of walnut roll with her. She hoped that he would sneak into the kitchen, whenever he did return, and wouldn’t have to rely on bare sweets to feed himself. She had a discontent, lonely bath, unbraided her hair by herself, feeling terribly lonely in her own room, blowing out the lamp when she was done and leaving it in favor for his familiar, comfortable bedchamber. She tried to read but couldn’t focus, the image of a crying little girl left behind with her aunt plaguing her mind. Alina tossed and turned, worrying about little Yana, about the report that they had found, worrying about Aleksander being kept so late for the reason she couldn’t possibly guess. Finally she succumbed to sleep, her face pressed against his pillow.

Hours or minutes could have passed until he finally returned - she had no way of knowing. But what she did know was that he kissed her gently when he came to bed and that she opened her eyes to the sight of his face.

“My love,” he said, the evening chill still lingering on him. He pulled her close and her warm feet touched his cold shins.

“You’re freezing,” she said, her hand reaching for his face.

“I know, I know; I am so sorry,” he kissed her lightly with a smile, his happiness to finally be with her obvious.

“Don’t apologize,” she said, tangling her feet with his on purpose. “You should get warm...”

“My sweet,” he said as he wrapped himself around her. “I have heard everything. Fedyor told me what happened at the village, he told me about the report you’ve found, you’ve had such a hard day and I was not here -”

She buried her face against his chest and inhaled the smell of chill and his skin, feeling herself finally relax. He didn't do more but stroke her hair, as if he knew that all she needed was this - for him to hold her and his closeness to comfort all the doubts and frustrations into a dull buzz at the back of her mind. Gradually her hold on him relaxed and they exchanged kisses, just sweet and slow kisses to ground one another after a day that has been too harsh.

"I *hated* today," he was saying. "I hated it all, the meetings, the consultations with the Apparatus, socializing with Tsar's minions - while you were here by yourself -"

"You missed me?" she asked, drawing out a kiss and nuzzling her nose against his, something that made his expression mellow each time she did it.

"Immensely," he said, so eager and earnest. "You're ruining me," he said, pressing his face against hers. "I don't want to work any more. I just want to be here, with you," he explained and Alina felt her heart skip as she stroked his beard. He turned his face into her palm and kissed it.

"Tell me about your meetings, Aleksander. Why did you have consultations with the Apparatus?"

He gave a dramatic sigh. "Oh that insufferable fool," he said. "He is, of course, the Tsar's advisor on all religious matters. As if the religion is anything but a window dressing to the monarchy. But in any case, the upcoming Passage of Winter and Celebration of Spring was discussed at painful and tedious length -"

"Oh?"

Aleksander leaned his face against his palm as she turned on her side, so they could comfortably talk. "It will happen in a week from now. There are two celebrations for us. One, held by the monarchs. A pompous burning of the effigy of Morena, on the outskirts of Tsar's hunting grounds, followed by a feast in the Grand Palace -"

"Ugh," Alina said, making him laugh. "Please tell me we don't have to stay for the whole celebrations?"

"No," he smiled indulgently and kissed her forehead. "Because we are allowed our own spring rites here," he placed more kisses all over her face. "A bonfire, our own food and wine, giving flowers and planting the seeds. And celebrations for as long as we please. And it is quite lovely to see our own people relax and enjoy," he said.

"That sounds wonderful," Alina said, wondering how it will look. "Will there be flower wreaths?" she asked, eliciting a full smile from him.

"One you have to make yourself," he said, "and place it on my head."

"Oh?" He watched her surprise with delight and kissed her palm again.

"Yes. There is plenty of tradition that we will have to take a part in, now that we're -"

"Married?" she asked, her tone half teasing. For a moment he didn't say anything, he just watched her with warm eyes.

"Yes," he said, looking at her all sentimental and soft. He moved a strand of her hair and traced his thumb along her lips. "Drinking wine from one glass and a basket of seeds and apples and planting a new tree together -"

Alina smiled, a bright unrestrained smile. "That sounds lovely," she said.

"It will be, I am sure. And I think they will all insist that you light the bonfire."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're now married to the leader of all Grisha," Aleksander said. "And to our own, you represent hope-"

"You mean *us* ? We represent hope?"

He hummed. "I am an ancient being, Alina. The darkness from the recess of the Old World. You are the sun of the new season -"

"As poetic as you seem to be tonight, husband, I still need to remind you that the sun would burn us all if there was no shade, no darkness to shelter us. Isn't that so? The balance that keeps the world alive."

"Not only beautiful but wise as well," he said.

"Are you trying to flatter me?" Alina asked, caressing his lips with her own thumb, and he pressed soft kisses against her fingertip.

"Always, my love," he told her. He smiled and Alina tried to imagine him with a wreath of flowers on his dark hair like a crown. She could not, and she wasn't sure if he was joking about that part. But one thing she did know - his words of love came easily, and she was sure in her heart that he had meant every single one.

Chapter End Notes

Additional notes -

Morana - known also as Morena, Marana, Marena, Mora, Mara, Maržana is a Slavic goddess of winter and death. She is usually pictured as a beautiful woman with pale skin and dark hair, with fangs and claws. As per legend, Morana captures the sun god Dazbog and drags him with her to the underworld for the duration of winter. He frees himself in time to come back to Earth and bring forth the new spring.

Old Slavic spring rites often include burning an effigy of Morana (at some point in March) to chase away the winter and help the new spring to arrive soon.

Slavic spring celebrations usually involve rites that symbolize fertility and rebirth of nature - planting seeds, gifting flowers, singing, eating and celebrating the return of the sun and warmth.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hello! I am sorry for not being able to finish and post this any sooner. I know lots of you wanted to read about Grisha spring celebrations and I hope you'll enjoy that bit, and everything else that's in here. And it seems that I'm more and more excited with each new chapter, and I'm very curious about how you like it and questions you might ask. Please, leave feedback! That's literally the only thing I get in return, and something I look forward to the most. Ask away and tell me what you think, and what you'd like to see. I do have a plan, and where the story is going but I always enjoy when I can add something or address something you'd like to read about. <3

"It's not happening," he was saying into her ear, even as she tickled him through his nightshirt and he tickled her right back. "Stop teasing."

"Unfair," Alina said, her protest muffled against Aleksander's clothed chest, which she wanted bare and warm against her cheek.

"You know we have to get up early. *You know*," he said, he nearly whined in between kisses, trying to convince himself. "I don't want to rush this, I want to enjoy you -"

"You *could* enjoy me," she tempted, knowing that this wouldn't go beyond early morning teasing, and that their day was filled with obligations and events to attend. "Right now," she still teased, and if anything she wanted him to know that she wanted him; she wanted him to think of her hands sneaking under his nightshirt to seek out his skin, later today, when she placed flowers on his head. A crown of flowers, she thought, one that she made herself, with Genya's help as they sat with other women in the tent that was put up three days ago. The ribbons were there yesterday, and baskets filled with branches and flowers. She made a delicate wreath, green and white, and imagined how it would look on him, and whenever she thought of him, she wanted to be right here, doing this; her mouth pressed to his, and her body burning to be touched.

"I will enjoy you," he said, grinning against her throat, his voice full of promises. "Tonight. When everything is over. I *will* enjoy you."

She shuddered as his hands stroked her sides, felt the wetness between her legs, imagining what she would do to him - kiss him and straddle his hips and just lift her dress, because she wouldn't want to wait for his hands to undress her. He promised he would make love to her tonight, he promised it twice, and then coaxed her to get up. Genya had everything ready for her, the bowl of water and the flowers for her hair. The windows were wide open as Alina sat in front of her vanity, remembering scrubbing the floors of her room in Keramzin as Ana Kuya talked about cleaning all the bad out. She had to wash her hands and scrub her hands raw, wear a clean dress, one that fit her, one she would not wear again because scraps could do for everyday life. Ana Kuya insisted on all the children from the orphanage looking perfectly presentable in the procession. How they looked and felt when the world wasn't watching was of lesser importance.

Alina watched as Genya exercised the opposite in action, combing and arranging her hair with utmost care, as if every single strand mattered; needing to be well placed and shiny. She put flowers in Alina's hair, beautiful white blossoms, tailoring them so that they would remain fresh all through the day.

"You will wear a kefta for the royal procession," she said, "but after that, I have a dress for you ready. For our own quaint and lowly celebrations."

"A white dress?"

"As white as the flowers in your hair. It's the tradition," she said as Alina observed the flower crown she made yesterday.

"Would the General honor this tradition? He always wears black."

"He always does. Though I imagine he would honor it enthusiastically this year," Genya was saying. "The first time that he gets a crown of flowers."

Alina just grinned, realizing that she ceased blushing at every mention and allusion of their marriage, and then she entertained herself with the imagery of Aleksander in a white shirt, and couldn't quite imagine it, but she was certain that he would be handsome, and with a smile on his face.

"You should wear your ceremonial kefta. One in gold, black and blue," Genya said. "Your husband might decide to match you."

"Do you mean his gold embroidered kefta?"

"The one," Genya nodded.

Alina sat back, waiting for Genya to finish her work, thinking over the implications of this. He would wear her color, putting her before the monarchy, before the old gods and new saints, making a point that she was his Sankta, his Sun Summoner, the one to whom he was loyal first and foremost. Not a true transgression, but subtle insubordination, not grave enough to be punished, significant enough not to be overlooked. Despite feeling pride for being his one and only, the one most dear and important to him, Alina wondered if simple black kefta would be a safer choice. But she wouldn't choose for him, because he was the leader of all the Grisha and his choices were not meant for the Tsar alone.

With her hair done, wearing her fine day dress and the kefta she wore for Tsaritsa's ball, Alina hurried to the kitchens. Ivan was leaving, but Fedor was still reading correspondence of some kind, still drinking tea.

"Oh, he left some coffee for you," Fedyor informed her and Alina found the pot and a cup awaiting her. She poured the coffee and joined Fedyor at the table, ready to relish her first sip and let it warm her all through her body. But when she swallowed the taste felt strange and somehow off. "What is it?" Fedyor asked when Alina made a face.

"I am not sure," she said. "It doesn't taste right."

"Did he forget sugar? Sometimes he forgets sugar when he's stressed, and today requires special security measures -"

"I don't think it's that," Alina said. "I can feel the sweetness. Oh well," she shrugged. "It's still nice enough."

Fedyor then told her that he just received a letter from his sister, that she wrote about his nephews and that he planned to visit them as soon as possible.

"Oh, not when you mention it," Alina said, taking a pastry from a plate that was sitting at the center of the table. "Would you like to visit Yana? I was going to check on her now, before everything begins."

"Of course," Fedyor agreed easily. He finished his tea and she finished her coffee, not able to chase away the unusual way it tasted.

The nursery was situated at the opposite end of the ground floor. It took them a couple of minutes to get there, as Alina made sure to stop and greet everyone whom they met. It was an important day for everyone, and she made sure to acknowledge it. Finally, when they arrived at the nursery, little Yana was asleep. She looked healthy, with her round cheeks and angelic face, and the nurse maids informed Alina that she was a happy, content baby girl. She and Fedyor stayed a little while, looking at the girl and talking in hushed tones. Eventually Alina had to leave - she greeted the staff and Fedyor, whom she would see soon, at the royal procession.

She didn't enjoy the feeling in her stomach as she thought of said occasion.

*

The golden embroidery of Aleksander's kefta caught the rays of sun and curious eyes of the noble folk as Alina walked beside him, her arm tucked in the crook of his elbow. The effigy of the winter goddess was a tall straw doll, dressed in a grey cloak, followed by a procession of brightly dressed, laughing boys and girls. Alina watched the children, their little coats and dresses, the ribbons in the hair of the little girls. She imagined that it was a rare occasion for children to act as free and joyous in otherwise uptight company - even the Tsaritsa smiled, seemingly pleased by the joy, and it would have been a sight of fairy tales, had there not been children who weren't given dinners, children who had nothing but scraps to wear, children who had to say goodbye to their parents or sisters.

"My lady," Aleksander said quietly. He must have noticed the shift of her mood, the dimming of her light right under his hand.

"Thinking of that little girl," Alina told him in an equally quiet tone. They were surrounded mostly by other Grisha, but still there were too many curious eyes and ears around. They still drew attention, the judgement over their clothing choices carefully guarded under the pretense of politeness.

"Which one?" Aleksander asked and she could tell he wasn't able to follow her train of thought.

"Yana's older sister. Natasha."

"Oh," his tone was knowing, and he squeezed her fingers just slightly, with enough warmth and assurance that she could let a little bit of her burden go and lean into his comfort. "You could offer her to visit her sister?"

Alina looked at him brightly. "That would be amazing. But -"

"But?"

"Oh, Aleksander. You haven't seen her aunt. You haven't seen the sheer animosity -" she stopped mid sentence, realizing that even if he didn't see it, he could well imagine it. "Oh, I'm so stupid. I'm sorry," she said.

"Not stupid, my love. Just seeing it all for what it is, for the first time," he said. "Would it help if I came along?"

Alina liked his suggestion. "Would you?"

"Of course," he said and brought her hand to his lips, lightly kissing her knuckles as they walked. Alina wondered how many people were watching, how many of them gossiped about the General's open affection for her. "I wish for Yana to know her family. Her sister. If I can help with that, I will."

Alina wanted to reciprocate his gesture, the slight touch of his lips, but most that she could do was hold on tighter onto him and smile. The procession halted and the effigy was set to ground, the children and grown people surrounding it, as the Apparatus came closer to say a prayer. Aleksander and Alina stood to the side, along with the rest of the Grisha, not truly thrown aside, because they were necessary to the Tsar, not really wanted or welcome there.

Someone lit the fire and threw it onto the straw effigy on the ground, followed by the children's cheer. There, the winter was over. For some, Alina thought, the winter was an inconvenience, for others a grave danger made of cold and hunger. She thought of Keramzin, of Ana Kuya and the children still living there, unwanted and unhappy.

“Remember when I told you,” Alina paused, staring at the catching fire. “That I wanted hope, for Grisha and Ravkans alike?”

“Yes, I do,” he whispered.

“I still want it,” she told him. “I am watching the children here and thinking of all the other children and -” she sighed, not sure how to express what she felt, the thoughts and memories all knotted up in her chest, rising into her throat. This was supposed to be a joyful day, yet Alina’s eyes were welling up. “So unjust, so cruel, for some to have all the care in the world... and others to have all the hardship.”

“I know what you mean,” he told her. “I wanted to change the world too,” he told her.

“Oh,” she said sadly, imagining a younger Aleksander, one who didn’t suffer as many losses and defeats as the man whose hand she was holding onto. The man who knew that some children were doomed to be unhappy, their lives lost to disease or famine, or war.

“I still want it, my love. I just think differently about the means to achieve it,” he told her, but his words could not lift the sadness from her heart.

“By cunning and strategies and politics,” she said.

“Yes,” he told her. “Not as noble as outright fighting. “Slow and tedious and frustrating. But still effective. A hundred years ago, that horrid aunt would have drowned little Yana,” he said.

“Like an unwanted pup,” Alina swallowed, wondering how many times he had seen something like that, or worse.

“Yes,” he said. “So there is some change after all. Not perfect and still not enough, but a change. And a fighting chance,” Aleksander told her. Alina nodded, blinking away the tears.

*

Freeing herself of the regal black dress felt too much like peeling away layer after layer of sweat and dirt when she was given her first bath after being imprisoned. The white dress awaited on her bed, along with the blue shawl; blue like irises in full bloom, delicately embroidered with gold. Alina dressed quickly, wrapping the shawl around her shoulders, noticing how simple it all was, how unlike what they usually wore. She would bring her kefta, not so much for protection, but for the possible cold, because the spring was still young and the air would still get chilly, especially towards the end of the day. She took the flower wreath, the previous conversation with Aleksander still heavy on her heart. Here she was, about to celebrate life, the new life, the rebirth of nature. She was her people’s saint, their icon, their symbol of hope. Was she able to bring about a rebirth for them all? A better, more just world, one where children would be safe? She looked at the flowers woven together, a call for spring, for warmth and happiness and thought of Aleksander who could wield armies and darkness and yet was frightened of loneliness. She couldn’t be a saint on her own.

Before she was caught she and Mal passed from one village to another and she had noticed, several times over, that people were erecting altars to Sankta Alina and another saint. The Starless Saint, they called him, praying that he’d be merciful and for the night to bring them shelter and comfort. She didn’t understand it, she wouldn’t, wondering how anyone could consider him a saint. The Darkling, the Black Heretic, the man who destroyed a city. A woman in one church told her that the light needed darkness - to shine more brightly, and not to burn everything away; and at the time Alina did not want to contemplate it. But now she did.

She knocked lightly at his door, despite having lived in his rooms for nearly two months now. He answered, inviting her in and she stepped inside, biting her lip and wondering if her attire, so unlike everything she wore here, would please him. But then she saw him in simple dark pants and soft white shirt and he looked transformed. He looked gentle and soft and less of an imposing figure clad in perpetual black. He looked vulnerable and real; and more like just a man.

“Milaya,” his smile was bright as he took in her appearance, the flowers and the kefta folded over her arm. “You look.... wonderful.”

“So do you,” she said, coming closer, a simple, tidy wreath of flowers in her hands. She wasn’t very skillful at this, and she thought he deserved more, a true recognition of everything he did and everything he strived for.

“Is that for me, my sweet?” he asked, his hand on her cheek and all she wanted was to melt into it, lose herself in his embrace until everything was gone - the war and the misery of their land, the injustices she couldn’t right with a palm full of sunshine.

“It’s for you,” she said. “Should I give it to you now?”

“If you wish - I mean, it is the tradition -”

He looked eager and happy and there was something vulnerable in his expression, and she realized he didn’t care if the wreath was grand or skillfully made - it was made for him. She stood on her tiptoes and he bowed his head and there he was, the grandest man she knew, wearing a humble little crown she had made. He took her hands in his, pulling her closer to him to kiss her; once, twice, three times before he sighed, his expression contentment and bliss. Alina’s eyes welled up again.

“We should go now,” he said, his forehead against hers. She thought about how she would rather stay here, alone with him, but his smile was inviting and soft and she let him lead her away.

*

The celebration was everything he promised her it would be - the bonfire, lit by many hands at once, the joy and the songs, the seeds Aleksander brought in a basket, which she planted in the garden together with others, and with the children from the palace. They returned to their tent, long tables filled with food awaiting them, and it was like the most wonderful picnic on a perfect sunny day. She sat next to Aleksander and watched the joy, watched the rare moments of complete happiness and celebration of the fact that the world existed, and they, all of them, existed as well. Alina thought how hard that life was, how uncertain and harsh; and for that fact moments like these were even more precious.

She let Aleksander pile her plate with food, even if it didn't exactly sit well for some odd reason, she laughed with Fedyor, she teased Genya when Genya tried not to look too often in David's direction.

"Would you finally go dance with him?" Alina asked as the sun was setting and their people were playing and singing.

"I didn't see you dancing either," Genya said, pulling Alina to her feet and then dragging her to the bonfire, to hold hands with everyone else and circle around the warmth of the fire. Their men might have remained seated, but Alina laughed, and Genya laughed as well, rare and free of pain that always seemed to linger around her eyes. When she went back to Aleksander she swayed on her feet a little, and if he did steady her, if he put his hands on her waist, nobody seemed to notice or care. They were entitled to their happiness here.

"Take me to bed, husband," she said as the chill was gathering along with the dark, her lips against his ear, and she half thought he'd decline and say something about them having to attend the celebrations, but he just smiled.

*

They entered Aleksander's rooms with laughter and he locked the door, and Alina knew she wouldn't need to rise early tomorrow, she knew she could spend hours content in his arms as the sun rose. She walked in front of him, lightheaded from the sweet wine she had, warmed by his gaze, untying her shawl, her light dress and letting it all drop to the floor, leaving her in nothing but her skin. Aleksander's eyes darkened, his gaze hot and filled with desire as he approached her.

"We haven't even reached the bed," he said.

"No," Alina smiled, all fake innocence as the slight chill in the air tickled her skin. "But the table is right here," she added, walking backwards until her bare skin touched the finely polished wood. She pushed herself up, closing her knees, her eyes intent on his.

Aleksander observed her, her flowers still in his hair. He came close and for a moment he just looked at her, just looked as if everything was somehow impossible and not real.

"I am cold," she said, all fake innocence and a sweet smile, trying to call back the mood of that night; remembering how he probed and teased and tried to make sure that this was what she wanted.

"Ah. I see," he said, his voice dropping low, sounding the way it did in bed. "Shall I do... something about that?" he asked, his hands warm and large on her knees, and she smiled and nodded, the way she did back then. He parted her knees then, fingers skimming along her thighs, pulled at her hips to bring her close, flush against his body. "Better?"

"I think you should undress," she said as she fumbled with the fastenings of his pants, aware of how tight and wet she was. His right hand slipped between her legs and he groaned when he felt her wetness.

"I think I should," he said, his free hand joining hers at untying his trousers as he touched her with the other, the movement of his fingers making her whimper and tremble with need until his pants finally gave in and she freed him and pulled him close.

"Please," she said, realizing that he did not kiss her, not yet, that he watched her with eyes full of darkness and desire; that she spread her legs and let him push into her body. "Please," she said, again and again, and he claimed her lips and her body, rocking and pushing into her as she held onto his shoulders. It went on and on and on, the intensity of their coupling ever increasing, his hand gripping her hip and the other angling her head for a kiss, the kisses he'd been giving her hard and earnest and she wanted it to go on, she never wanted it to stop and then suddenly the tension in her body snapped and she felt as if the sun itself was bursting through her skin. She felt him come then, her legs spread and locked around him as she shuddered.

"Can I take you to bed now?" Aleksander asked and she laughed, still lightheaded from desire.

"Yes," She nodded against his chest and moaned as he pulled out and she felt like she could do it all again, like this wasn't nearly enough to satiate her need. But as soon as her head touched the pillow, as soon as Aleksander undressed and pulled her body close to his, wrapping them in a blanket, her eyes dropped close and Alina gave herself to sleep, completely exhausted.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hello! Here's the new chapter, with the answers to all the questions you asked me the last time. I hope you enjoy it, but before you start reading, a fair and important warning: there's mention of child abuse in this chapter (physical abuse), the consequences of which are explicitly described.

I hope you'll enjoy this nevertheless, and I think that so far you've come to get to know me and that you know that I am not shying away from more serious topics that belong to the world where this story is set. Yes, this is a story about Alina and Aleksander, but it's also a story about their world and the problems and dangers of that world.

Please be so kind and leave a comment <3 After finishing and posting a new chapter there's nothing that makes me so happy as hearing what you thought and how you liked it - it's what keeps me excited and it's what keeps me going. Thank you for staying with this story this long.
<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sound of thunder ripped through the quiet of the morning, startling Alina awake. She sat up, mindful not to wake Aleksander who slept peacefully, despite the loud noise of the thunder. Another crack came, sudden and loud like a gunshot, followed by a gust of wind and the sound of the storm.

Rain was beating against the windows in a harsh and relentless pattern. This was probably the biggest storm Alina has seen in a long while - and she had seen many. Ravkan springs could be tricky and harsh, and this one was not different. She glanced at the flower crown on Aleksander's night stand and smiled, pulling her feet from under the blanket and looking around for something to wear, for she was still literally nude. Without the covers and the warmth of his body she was exposed to the rather chilly air of the room, and she needed something to cover herself - his banyan was the closest thing available and she wrapped herself in it, thinking how ridiculous she must have looked. It didn't matter, not here - Aleksander would rather have her wear something too big and unflattering than let her be cold. She sat on the edge of the bed, on her side, where her slippers were supposed to be, and after she found them and pushed her feet inside she walked to the large windows which were safely closed.

The rain was falling down, thick and heavy like a curtain, a downpour that made the trees bend as the wind howled. And just to think, how yesterday was sunny and mild, and how the weather had turned so suddenly. Alina pulled the comfortable fabric tight around herself, wishing for her nightshift and socks and thinking about flames in the fireplace. She could ask someone to get the fire going for her, but first she'd have to go and pick up all the clothes discarded all over the floor of the War Room, a thought that made her grin in the most pleased way.

"You'll catch a cold," Aleksander said, somehow materializing behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

"Now I won't," she smiled, leaning back against his chest. He made a content sound, his face buried against her neck, his body still warm from sleep. "That's a storm," she said, fascinated by the rain's strength. She found she enjoyed the storms when she was able to stay inside, solely for the reason to stay and simply be, as nature did not allow anything beyond that. And what a joy it was to stay right here. She lifted her arm to touch her husband's face and he turned it into her palm.

"We don't have anywhere to go, anything much to do today" he said, his face buried in her hair, his arms warm, pulling her against him. "We can call for breakfast and have tea, and stand near the windows of the common room. Or go visit classes," he paused to move her hair and kiss her neck. "Or you could go to the library. I bet you'd like that," he was saying, and each option sounded appealing and wonderful. "I do have meetings, but they shouldn't last too long."

She suddenly had all this freedom to enjoy herself, to do whatever her heart desired, even when her days were packed with activity and obligations, she still had moments of peace and time to enjoy it the way she wanted. Alina turned around, so she would face him, finding him standing in a nightshirt and sleeping pants, glad that he apparently got dressed at some point of the night.

"I need a dress," she said into his chest.

"I think there's one on the War Room floor," he teased. She retaliated by tickling his side and he tickled her in return. "It's rather cold. I could start a fire in the fireplace. And I'm certain there's something warmer in your rooms, than a spring festivities dress -"

Alina smirked. "Well the bed is warmer, but I would really like some breakfast. And tea," she added.

Aleksander took her face between his palms and kissed her. "Then fire, breakfast and tea it is. You go and find something warm to wear."

"Yes, my General," she told him easily, and then her stomach rumbled.

"It seems you're rather hungry," he smiled.

"You better hurry up," she told him and with one more kiss she left to find all that she needed.

She returned shortly, dressed and warm, with her hair neatly braided. Aleksander was near the fireplace and the fire was going.

"I will go down to the kitchens to get my coffee," she said and he answered with a smile.

Alina hurried down the stairs and through the hallways of the Palace, greeting Nadya and Misha the heartrender at the kitchens' door. Fedyor and Ivan were inside, chatting animatedly, and she could see the pot of coffee awaiting her as she entered. The men looked up and greeted her, and then something peculiar happened - Ivan gave her a long searching look and then glanced at Fedyor who seemingly forgot the pastry halfway to his mouth.

Alina paused in the middle of the room.

"Ivan, Fedyor... did something happen?"

Fedyor started coughing. Ivan rose from his chair.

"No, moya soverenyia, not at all. We, uh, we're hoping you're feeling well," he said, the words seeming out of character for him. Fedyor gaped at him, just slightly, before he too rose and smiled.

"And we hope you enjoyed yesterday's festivities," he added charmingly and Alina felt slightly more at ease. Fine, she thought, perhaps she interrupted a private conversation between them.

"I am quite okay, thank you," she said as they both stared at her with a quizzical mixture of surprise and expectation. "I was just going to get my coffee -"

"Oh I could bring it to you with the early reports," Fedyor offered and Ivan gave him a sharp look. Alina felt confused, but she returned his smile.

"That truly is not necessary - unless I have interrupted your conversation, or-?"

"Oh no, no, not at all" Ivan said, his voice quite pleasant, something she truly wasn't used to hearing from him. "We're not bothered. Not at all."

"Not in the slightest," Fedyor added eagerly.

Alina smiled, deciding to take her coffee and leave them to whatever strange discussion they were having. After all, everyone needed and deserved privacy.

*

"You do seem hungry today," Aleksander teased when Alina beat him to the last little pancake on the big plate.

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I know you love them. Here, do you want -?" She offered it to him and he just gave her an endearing smile.

"No, you eat it. I'm fine," he said, passing her the jam. "I'm so glad you're enjoying food. You've been... quite unwell when we got back here," he said tentatively, as if he was trying not to upset her by bringing back the memories of how she came here for the second time. Alina sighed.

"I'm glad I'm back here," she told him simply, realizing how much he wanted her safe and healthy. While Mal never could quite accept her new appetite, possibly out of concern because they struggled to find everything, including shelter and food, Aleksander enjoyed the fact that she was eating properly and resting enough and that her summoning was slowly returning to what it used to be. And even if she were with Aleksander in a situation she had faced with Mal, she doubted he would ever comment on the amount of food she was capable of eating.

And he just let her eat the last bit of his breakfast. Alina sighed, completely content, as she licked all the jam from her spoon - it was rather sweet - which was why Aleksander enjoyed it - and even though she usually found it too sweet, today it felt perfect. The coffee still tasted off, but it was warm and she enjoyed how it seemed to wake her up. She needed it - despite a full night's sleep, she still felt tired.

Aleksander was about to say something when someone knocked on the door, loud enough to sound urgent. He looked at Alina and in that moment she couldn't shake the feeling that something bad had happened. They rose from the table at the same time and Aleksander walked to open the door.

It was Ivan, and he looked grim, all of the unusual emotion from earlier now gone from his face. He greeted them both as Aleksander let him in.

"Did something happen?" Aleksander asked, for he probably knew - no matter how well Ivan could keep his features schooled, Aleksander would know that something did upset him.

"Yes; I am afraid so, moy soverenyi," Ivan said. He looked at Alina briefly, and then back at Aleksander. "Dimitri is here."

"Dimitri?" Aleksander exchanged glances with Alina.

"Yes. He wanted to know if a child from a village came here, by any chance -"

"Which child?" Alina asked as something dark, almost like a premonition rose in her chest. She knew what Ivan was going to answer. She just *knew*.

"Yana's sister, moya soverenyia. it seems that the child has been gone... since *yesterday* -"

Alina looked at Aleksander, the panic clearly written on her face.

"Take us to him, Ivan," Aleksnader said.

Three of them hurried down the stairs, where Dimitry awaited in the grand foyer of the Little Palace, looking drenched and cold, holding his soaked through hat in his hands. He seemed tired and his face was pale, his usual calm replaced with very visible worry. Alina thought how it still rained heavily as her boots sounded against polished floor, how cold it had to be outside while she pulled her kefta tight around herself. Dimitri seemed relieved when they showed up in front of him, he even tried to bow, but Aleksander said it was not necessary.

"Please tell us what happened," Aleksander said as the other man looked up at him.

"Moy soverenyi, she had run away again," he sighed. "She ran away three times last week. Since you took her sister. She ... Ekaterina said she was unruly and disobedient, but I fear, I fear they've been hitting her -"

Alina looked at Aleksander, feeling the cold and dread wash over her.

"I was hoping she somehow came here -"

"She did not, Dimitri, we did not see her," Aleksander said.

"Oh Saints," Dimitri said.

"That means she is somewhere out there," Alina spoke her thoughts aloud. "She is somewhere, alone, and lost," she looked at Aleksander, as guilt and desperation seized her, realizing that her eyes were burning and that her cheeks were wet. "Aleksander-"

He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and looked at Dimitri. "Did you try to find her?"

"Yes, yesterday. Me and four more men, we looked around the village and in the woods nearby. That was where she left to last three times. She doesn't really know how to come here. We looked for hours, and even after dark, we truly did, but we did not find her. But I hoped -"

"You hoped she was here rather than lost," Aleksander said. "I understand. You should have come sooner."

"You do not owe us to solve our problems like that," Dimitri said. "Believe me. Most of us are thankful for doing everything you do for all of us."

"Still, she is a child," Aleksander stated almost softly. "Enough of that. Ivan -"

"Yes, moy soverenyi?"

"I want you to go. Take four more heartrenders with you. Take your raincoats, take the dogs. I know it's raining and the smell is probably gone, but they can still hear and sense a living being hidden somewhere -"

"As you command, moy soverenyi," Ivan said.

"If I may," Alina looked at Aleksander, who nodded. She looked at Ivan then. "Bring the girl here. I want her looked at by healers, and properly fed, and I want her to see her sister at least, before -" Alina paused, taking a steadying breath and wiping away a tear. "Before she must return to her aunt."

"Do as Lady Kirigan said," Aleksander told Ivan. He then looked at Dimitri. "You're welcome to stay and warm up, and we shall find you dry clothes," He looked at a guard standing nearby. "Take him to the kitchens and tell Oleg to give the man a warm meal and a drink. Then you're welcome to join me as we wait," Aleksander said.

"I would much rather help your men," Dimitri replied.

"I appreciate that, Dimtri. However, my heartrenders can hear what you can not - even the faintest heartbeat of a child in a womb. Let alone a child that is big enough to run away. You have been drenched to your skin. I do not want you to become ill," Aleksander reasoned.

"Please accept our offer," Alina added.

*

The panic and tension turned into a perpetual uneasy feeling of nausea that settled in Alina's stomach and would not let go. She watched from the window as Ivan and the others rode off, followed by four dogs, as the rain slowed down. Alina hoped it would stop, it would certainly make their search easier. She went to the kitchens looking for some tea, wanting to calm both her nerves and her stomach. Aleksander had to attend meetings with the Royal Counselors and he told her to send Fedyor as soon as they had any news. He kissed the top of her head and Alina's stomach turned, as she considered his words. Little Natasha could be found either dead or alive. Or not found at all.

Fedyor watched her with guarded concern as she observed Aleksander's departure from the same window where she watched Ivan leave.

"Ivan will not let you down, moya soverenyia," Fedyor said. "Perhaps you should rest? I can wait with Dimitri. If anything happens I will come looking for you," he said.

"I think I will go check on Yana," Alina told him. She thought about waiting with two of them and that would mean keeping her composure in front of Dimitri. Alina did not feel up to that, but she did not want to be alone either. So she made her way to the nursery, where she found Yana awake with one of the nursemaids. The maid, a young woman named Svetlana was sitting next to the crib, singing softly, obviously trying to put the little girl down for a nap.

“Am I disturbing?” Alina asked quietly.

“Oh no, not at all, moya soverenyia” Svetlana said. “Would you join us?”

Alina smiled, pulled close a chair and sat down close to Svetlana. The little girl was looking around, obviously trying to evade sleep and Svetlana’s attempts to calm her.

“Could I hold her?” Alina asked, needing something to focus on, something other than the missing little girl, the storm and her nervous stomach. Svetlana hesitated for a moment and then placed the baby in Alina’s awaiting arms, and sure enough, the child’s slight weight and the warmth did seem to help Alina relax.

Alina had held dozens of babies and tiny children, some who cried and some who learned early enough that protests and pleas for help did not matter. And despite it all, Alina liked holding them, imagining what it would be like to belong for just a moment, to have someone to hold onto and feel safe. The young children in the orphanage who did not know the difference between looking Ravkan and looking Shu liked her - she could read stories in a quiet voice and she would hold them until they fell asleep. Yana seemed to calm down to Alina’s quiet humming, placed near Alina’s heart. The rain still beat against the windows and while it did, Alina found it was more bearable with the soft sound of baby’s breath in her ear.

Svetlana got up carefully and Alina just nodded, content to be left alone with the child. She could have placed the little girl into her crib, but Alina wanted the feeling of comfort, the baby’s warm weight against her chest, and she sat there for a while, until the door opened and Fedyor stepped inside.

His face was serious.

“Moya soverenyia... you should come at once.”

*

Her stomach was turning once again, but she had no time for that. She hurried after Fedyor, following him towards the corridors where infirmary ward was situated - there was commotion, Alina saw familiar looking rain coats and red keftas, she heard men’s voices as they talked in hushed but still anxious tones. A door opened and she followed Fedyor inside - Ivan stood in the middle of the room, drenched by the rain, his kefta on the floor, and a small body on the bed, two healers standing above.

“We need to remove her clothing, all of it, I need something dry to dress her, someone should start a fire -” Sonya was saying.

“I can do it,” Ivan said.

“No, not you, I need you to go and change right now,” she said.

“Go change, Vanya,” Fedyor was saying, “I will stay and help.”

Ivan then saw Alina. His face was pale, his lips bluish from the cold. “We found her in a ditch inside the forest. Her heart was so slow and so weak that I had to keep it going all the way to here,” he said. “I did all that I could -”

“Will she survive?” Alina managed, the words tight and sticky in her throat and looked towards the healers. A young healer gave Sonya a pair of scissors. The clothes that little Natasha was wearing were impossible to pull off of her.

“I shall do my best to see it happen,” Sonya said with determination as she cut apart the patched up dress. “Oh, Saints,” she said then, completely still.

“What is it?” Alina asked.

“Come and look,” Sonya answered, covering her mouth with her hand. Alina and Ivan came closer - Sonya had uncovered the upper part of the girl’s body - she was pale and thin, and her white skin was covered with bruises - dark, bluish and purple bruises, bruises that were fading, bruises that looked livid and fresh.

Alina grabbed Ivan’s arm on instinct and the heartreder cursed under his breath.

“She’s completely covered with them... someone has been beating her -”

“No, not someone,” Alina said, as Sonya put her hands on the little girl’s skin, searching for injuries, calling forth her power to help the body heal. “Her aunt. And I -”

“Her left arm,” Sonya interrupted.

“What with it?” Alina asked.

“Broken. Right here,” she put two fingers on Natasha’s thin arm, just below her shoulder.

“Maybe she fell?” Alina offered, as Fedyor approached and his face darkened instantly.

“No, she did not,” Ivan said darkly. “Not likely.”

"What do you mean?" Alina asked as Sonya and the other healer kept working, covering Natasha from head to toe to warm her up. Sonya discarded all the wet clothes in a heap on the floor - Alina would order for them to be thrown away, never to be seen again.

"That's not where you break your arm if you fall. Her arm was twisted. By someone taller. Bigger than her," Ivan said.

Alina looked at him and then back towards the bed, the pale little face and red hair covered with dirt and mud. Her stomach rebelled and she felt she was going to be sick, the telltale sign that she had to throw up. Covering her mouth she pulled away from them. Fedyor grabbed her arm, guiding her, almost as if he knew what was going on - he guided her to another door and adjoining room, and all Alina registered was that there was a nightstand with a bowl. She threw up and Fedyor still held her arm firmly, not letting her go until she was done.

"Oh Saints, I am sorry," she said. Fedyor helped her sit and she tried to calm her breathing, finally feeling better after she lost her entire breakfast. "I am sorry, this was just... too much -"

"Moya soverenyia," Fedyor said carefully and crouched down, so she wouldn't have to look up to see him. "I am in no way trying to intrude on your privacy. But I think Sonya should look at you as well," he said.

"... why?" Alina asked, watching as his face turned from concerned to soft.

"You are aware that I can hear heartbeats," he told her. Alina stared at him, dumbfounded, thinking how she should know what he was trying to tell her. When she continued to gape at him, he took a breath. "Not counting mine... right now I can hear two," he told her.

Alina's mind stopped. She looked around the room, but there were only two of them inside. Two hearts? How could she have two - ?

"What are you saying, Fedyor?" she asked, realizing then that she felt tired, that the coffee tasted off, that the usually too sweet jam was perfect now.

That her monthly bleeding should have come... three weeks ago.

"One is loud and strong and that one is yours. The other one is still faint and not very loud but it's there," he said and smiled. "An unborn child's heartbeat."

"An... unborn child," she repeated, realizing finally what it meant, what Fedyor was saying, what her body was telling her but she had been too distracted, too carefree to properly pay attention. Fedyor smiled brightly, a smile that warmed his eyes and lit up his entire face.

"Yes," he said. A laugh escaped her as emotions seemed to sweep her up in a whirlwind - surprise and happiness and the vastness of the unexpected realization. She was always too thin, too sickly; her body frail; she had nothing and nobody, and all of her future consisted of serving in the First Army or perhaps becoming a maid. She did not dream of a future with a home and children, not a family of her own. She did not try to conceive and she did take the tonic that Sonya gave her but obviously it had not been enough. She enjoyed her husband without any expectation and without any true worry. "Should I see if Sonya can come here?" Fedyor asked and Alina nodded absently as the realization was settling in her mind. A child. Hers and Aleksander's child.

They created *a child*.

Alina placed her hands on her stomach - which was still flat and unchanged. Fedyor returned, saying that Sonya would be with them in a moment. She was in a daze, as Fedyor paced, still smiling. Oh so that was why Ivan and him looked at her *like that* this morning? And she was completely unaware and unsuspecting - and Saints, what about Aleksander? She had to tell him, he ought to know right away, she had to talk to him - but how would he react? He told her, after that first time, that he would cherish her and be happy if she were pregnant, but that was a hypothetical situation then, something they have talked about, but did not truly expect to happen. Would he be excited? Would he be worried? What if this was a bad time for her to fall with a child, all the circumstances considered? But - she thought, she knew - Aleksander who got up from the bed to hug her this morning, so that she would not be cold - he would protect her from everything, his own worries included.

She looked at Fedyor - Aleksander did say to send for him if anything happened - but she needed to talk to Sonya first. She needed to talk about little Natasha, she needed to know how the little girl was doing and then Sonya could look at her, as well - Alina got up, finding her bearings again. That was when Sonya walked in.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked, looking at Alina.

"Better now," she said. "How is the girl?"

"She should be fine, but I need to stay with her through the night. She needs to stay in bed for a week at least. What happened -?"

"I threw up," Alina said. Sonya frowned. "I... have been feeling queasy and tired and, uh, food and drink are tasting differently, and -"

"I can hear the heartbeats," Fedyor said.

"Oooh," Sonya smiled and came closer, placing one hand on Alina's shoulder and the other on her stomach. Her smile grew. "Oh that's right. You're pregnant. About six weeks, I would say," Sonya said.

Six weeks. The Tsaritsa's ball, the morning after, before she even had the tonic. Sonya moved her hands over Alina's body. "Everything seems to be okay," she said. "Feeling queasy and even throwing up is normal. But should it bother you too often, I can make you something to help your stomach settle. Rest when you feel tired, make sure to eat regularly and - congratulations," she said, smiling even wider.

*

After that Alina did send Fedyor to get Aleksander, and after he left, Alina went back to his rooms. *Their* rooms. She paused at the bedchamber's door, remembering that exact morning - how she pulled her nightshirt off and offered herself to Aleksander, and that was all it took for them to make a child. Perhaps they truly were made for each other, something she always felt since the first time he touched her in his tent and spilled the light from her veins. She rubbed her stomach, feeling lightheaded and giddy when her stomach rumbled again - she was hungry, of course she was, since she threw up the entirety of her breakfast. She asked for food and some mild tea, deciding to sit in Aleksander's study, surrounded with his belongings, his writing, his books. After the food and the tea came, she put it all on the small table and curled up inside the big chair, dozing off after a few bites of food and half cup of tea.

Some time later she woke up to an arm resting on her thigh and Aleksander kneeling in front of her.

"Sleepy head," he said with an amused smile. Alina rubbed her eyes - he was finally, finally here. She almost launched herself at him, clutching him around his neck as he rose to his knees to hug her; and she held on for a while as he rubbed soothing circles over her back.

"Fedyor and Ivan told me about the little girl," he said.

"Oh, Sasha, that was terrible," she said into his shoulder. "She was covered in bruises. Saints know how many times she was hit and how," she added and he nodded against her. "We need to keep her safe somehow, she cannot go back there," she said, nuzzling his neck.

"I want to do that too," he told her, "But I am not sure how. She belongs to her family -"

"I know all of that," she told him, pulling back to see his face. "But we have to find a way," she said, leaning forehead against his.

"My amazing wife," he said, stroking her cheek. Alina swallowed, thinking of what she had to say to him; thinking how some day, she would want someone to protect her child if she wasn't able to. "So caring."

"Sasha -"

"Shh, we will think of something," he said as he kissed her cheek.

"Sasha I need to tell you something," her voice came out unsure, trembling, and he pulled away to take a look at her.

"Did something happen?"

Alina took a breath, her brain scrambling for words. How do you say something so huge as this? His eyes searched her face, soft and warm and concerned, and she thought how unique this moment was; how his reality was so different from hers, and how she would change it in just a moment.

"Sasha," she paused, nervous and excited, her heart beating wildly. "Remember the morning after the Tsaritsa's ball?"

He grinned. Oh she could *see* all the dirty thoughts that had to be swirling in his mind in the way he looked at her.

"How could I forget?" he said, brushing his nose against hers as he smiled.

"Well, you.. we, we might remember it for more than one reason," she told him. His eyebrows rose slightly as he looked at her, and she could see the surprise on his face, the quizzical glint in his eyes as her lips spread into a smile. "I'm....," she paused and took his hand, brought it to her stomach and softly placed it there. "I'm with a child," she said.

She would never forget the way his face changed as he realized what she just told him, from shock and surprise to tender happiness, and he pulled her to him then, overjoyed and teary eyed.

"Milaya, oh *milaya*," he kissed her, her face in his palms. "Are you sure? Are you certain of this?"

"Absolutely sure and certain," she told him as he kept kissing her, kneeling in front of her, trying to pour all the warmth and passion and happiness into each touch of his lips. "Sonya confirmed it and before that Fedyor and Ivan could hear the heartbeat," she said. She was smiling stupidly as their powers met between them and she could feel all that he was feeling - overwhelming joy which he could not quite believe, such happiness that she felt dizzy and drunk on it. He laughed and tears slipped down his cheeks; and Alina brushed them away as he moved his hand to rest on her stomach.

"Really and truly -?"

"Yes, Aleksander, yes," she said, letting him claim her lips again, letting him kiss her breathless, and then they both laughed, happiness spilling like the sunlight from Alina's palm.

"I want to hold you," he told her. "Will you let me hold you?"

"Of course I will," she said and he pulled her to her feet, only to sit and take her in his lap, the way he did when they had their long conversation here. Aleksander seemed unable to stop kissing her, caressing her face, touching her stomach in almost reverent way as she lay against him, her head on his shoulder.

"So this is why you're exhausted," he said.

"Mhmm," she told him. "Sonya said it's normal, and that I should rest," she said.

"And rest you will," he told her gently, "I don't want you to overtax yourself -"

"I can't do nothing," she told him with a smile. "I am expecting a child, I am not sick."

"I know, my love, I know. But i want to take care of you, I want to protect you, I want you to be comfortable -"

"I am comfortable," she said, caressing his lips. He kissed her fingertips. "As comfortable as possible. I still can be active and useful -"

"In moderation," he said.

"Are you going to be all mother hen now?" she asked, amused and he gave her a full, brilliant smile.

"You can bet on it," he told her. Then, something seemed to cross his mind. "When?" he asked her.

"Oh," Alina had to pause as well and count the months. "In winter. Just around Koliada? I think. Perhaps Sonya could tell us with more precision," she said, covering his hand, splayed over her stomach, with both of hers, relishing the way he held her, like she was the most precious thing that existed.

"Perfect," he said. "Perfect, oh, perfect -"

"It is?"

He sighed, holding her close. "Oh my love. Just a few months ago I didn't even dream about you wanting anything to do with me. And now?" He touched her stomach anew, the expression on his face infinitely tender. "This, this is miracle -"

"This is you and me," she said as he nodded, his forehead against hers. He stilled, growing serious, pensive. "Sasha? What is it?"

"I never.... never thought I could create something good. Something pure," he looked up, his eyes dark. She knew what he meant, she knew what he was thinking of.

"You were alone then," she said, her tenderness and compassion infinite, seizing her chest fully and completely. "You were desperate and in need of help, and you had none. But you are not alone any more," she whispered, pausing to give him the gentlest kiss. "We created this together."

"Yes," he said, his fingers wrapping around hers, as their child, still small, rested somewhere inside her body. "Together."

"And you will never be alone again," she promised, giving him another kiss, pulling his face to hers, the back of his head cradled inside her palm. "Never again, my love."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was, I admit, completely self indulgent. i hope you don't mind a fairly dramatic discovery of Alina's pregnancy.

One of my headcanons is that heartrenders would be great for search and rescue missions. I hope that makes sense, and I couldn't resist that small comedic moment with Ivan and Fedyor as they tried and failed not to be weird after the realized that there are two heartbeats.

Thank you and see you in the next chapter!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone - I apologize for not replying to all the comments in the previous chapter yet - I was working on this one, and hopefully you'll forgive me. Here you get some fluff, bit of angst, friendship and a badass Alina moment. I hope you enjoy it <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When she was a small girl, Alina had an old toy, a stuffed animal that could have been either a bunny or a bear. It was impossible to tell, because it was worn and it missed an eye, however to Alina it was the most precious possession she owned for a long while.

A child needs a stuffed animal, at least one, especially if said child was injured and ill, and among strange faces. Alina came to the nursery late in the afternoon, where several nursemaids offered her to pick a toy she would bring to Yana's older sister. She picked a soft white dog, mostly because it looked like a toy a little girl could hug and hold close while she rested. Alina sighed, wondering if that small amount of comfort would be the only thing she was able to provide for the little girl. Her aunt would demand her back, and if they didn't find a way to dissuade the aunt, they would be child thieves, something Grisha were accused of quite often. Alina thought how she would rather have that than send Natasha back, and risk her safety and her very life.

After picking a toy for Natasha, Alina checked on Yana - the little girl was asleep, her lips parted, her tiny arms spread out in a completely carefree pose. Alina paused over the crib, thinking how in just a couple of months she would have *this* ; a child, a small baby girl or a boy, to love and cherish and keep safe. That was how Aleksander found her, smiling brightly at the sight of her watching a baby sleep. They shared a look over the crib, a look only they knew the meaning of.

"I thought I'd go with you," he offered, "And then we can have dinner and perhaps a walk?"

"I'd like that," she told him, observing how his smile wasn't fading. Just several months ago she would never dream that her life would turn out like this. He took her hand on a battlefield and she expected a fight she could never win. She didn't want to win any more, not if *they* couldn't win together.

The infirmary ward was quiet, and Sonya was with the little girl who slept. Natasha looked better, her hair clean, her cheeks slightly tinged with color. Sonya told Alina that the girl was awake for a short while and that she asked about her sister. She took her medicine and ate a bit of soup that Oleg personally brought for her.

"Once she's better, she should see Yana," Alina said.

"She told me that she promised her mother that she would take care of Yana. And that her aunt would not allow it."

"Oh," Alina said, nearing closer to place the little stuffed animal next to the little girl. Natasha was a child and she deserved to be a child - she deserved to be loved and protected; she deserved to belong and not to be treated like an unwanted servant in a cruel home. Alina looked at Aleksander, his expression concerned and soft. They needed to talk about this. Alina needed to find a way.

Aleksander offered her his hand, something that he usually did, and she wrapped her fingers around his arm, settling her hand near the crook of his elbow. He looked at her fondly and put his other hand on top of hers, so soft and sure, his shadows joyfully joining her light.

"Let's go," he said. "We can check on her tomorrow."

The dinner was an amusing event, mostly because Aleksander inquired about every bit of food she ate, if it was good; if she was feeling fine. He was endearing and soft and she enjoyed his attention, but he also had every potential to become truly and insufferably overprotective. However, that didn't seem like such a terrible prospect, and she enjoyed the thought of being protected and cherished, exactly as he promised her.

The rain had ceased and they took a walk outside. The air was chilly and fresh, with lingering wetness of the recently fallen rain, the remnants of the bonfire from just a day before soaked through. It felt like a wholly different world that they stepped into, one with multiplied hopes, expectations and happiness. She realized that the feeling grew in her gradually, like a tree that dried and was brought back to life by careful, tending hands - the notion that this was where she belonged, the feeling that she was home. They walked through the garden, observing the first budding roses, where Alina had to talk her husband out of picking one.

"I want to see them bloom," she protested, her hand on his, before he could pluck the new flower. He smiled and relented.

"Whatever you say, my love," he said, taking her hand. Alina stepped in front of him, pulling him to her, so he was standing right in front of her, a sharp dark figure against the grey skies.

"You keep calling me that," she said, biting her lip and searching his eyes. "My love."

"Because you are," he told her, holding her face in his palm. "My beloved."

"But do you -?" she paused, thinking how it had to be silly, to even ask something like this. But she wanted to hear him say it, she wanted those exact words from his lips. "I have never heard you say-."

"Solnishka," he smiled. "You are right. I did not."

“And neither did I,” she told him.

“Love is in the actions,” he observed. “Not just words. You watched over me while I was helpless and ill,” he paused then, pulling her closer. “However words are important -”

“They are,” she told him, holding onto his warm hands to ward off the early evening’s chill. She remembered how long it took her to call herself his wife, and how much longer to call him her husband, and finally to tell him that he was her love; how many measured steps between her first words to him after they married and now, and how much burden was released with each one. “Do you mind -?”

“Of course not,” he pulled one of her hands to his lips and kissed it. “You can tell me anything, ask me anything,” he said softly, then he lifted her chin with a single finger. “I love you, Alina,” he said simply and she felt her eyes fill with tears. “More than anything.”

“And I love you,” she told him. “The General, the Darkling... *the Heretic*,” she paused as well, her throat tight as his eyes welled up at her words. “My lover and my husband. *All of you.*”

He pulled her close and kissed her among the barely blooming roses, not caring who might walk in on them, who might see, and with each kiss she was forgetting herself and where they were, until he finally let her part from him.

“I think ... we should go to bed,” she managed.

*

“Do you think we should keep doing this?” he asked as his eyes roamed across her naked breasts. They have made love twice, and as much as Alina was enthusiastic at the beginning, she felt completely spent right now, pulling the soft cover up to her waist.

“You’re wondering if our activities could be somehow harmful for me?” Alina said, turning on her side, to comfortably observe him. He opened and closed his mouth and Alina wondered if he was worried he’d have to stop making love to her, fully knowing that he would do it, if there was any need to. She smiled at him, teasing, as he said something about not wanting to make her uncomfortable. “Sasha,” she said fondly, feeling wonderful and satiated, her body completely relaxed. “I talked to Sonya, after we’ve been left alone, and she said that it’s fine. That I can enjoy all the normal activities, including this, if I want to. And I *want* to.”

“Oh, do you?” he teased back gently, softly moving over her, just to be close and touch her, without any other intention. He pulled her cover back and observed her stomach, now bare for his eyes to see. It looked unchanged, and still he kept caressing it gently, as if the child inside could feel it. Maybe, she thought, if they love her, or him, from the very start, maybe all that love would pass into every bit of the child’s body and soul; a love so complete and present, unlike the hollow loneliness of her own childhood, or terror and fear of his.

“What is it?” Alina asked, curiously observing Aleksander’s expression, the way his lips stretched as if he just realized something that pleased him.

“You’re mine,” he said then, no interlude or explanation. With an amused chuckle Alina drew closer, sliding her leg between his, putting her face on his pillow.

“I am?” she said, propping her face up in her palm, her hair spilling over her breasts. Aleksander moved it aside, blatantly looking at her naked body, moving his hand over her breast like it belonged there.

“You are,” he said then, his expression happy and dazed. “I have not... in a long, long while, there was not a person who... who’d care to love both Aleksander and the Heretic. If there ever was one,” he paused, searching her face, caressing her cheek, her lips. “It’s been so long since anyone wanted to belong with me. And... When we were married, I thought it was a mockery of marriage, something you did not want but that might protect you. I never thought you would want me, or have me -”

She pulled his face to hers, so that their noses touched.

“I did not think I could be happy. But I am glad we were both wrong,” she told him. He smiled, melancholic and moved, and kept looking over her, eyes settling on her stomach again. It was endearing and funny and wondrous.

“I ... I keep thinking that ... There's three of us now. Right now, right here,” he said, making her smile.

“Yes,” she said, wondering if her face might start to hurt from so much smiling, if so much happiness could somehow be too much to bear.

“And I was not supposed to have this, all of this, I was not -”

Alina paced a hand on his mouth, shushing him. “And I was never supposed to be a saint or a savior to Grisha and yet. Life surprises us, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” he said slowly, moving close to kiss her. “I can’t say I’d protest. Ever.”

She snuggled close to him, basking in the afterglow of lovemaking and the warmth of his words. Aleksnader covered them both. For a moment she let herself slip into dreams, focused on his breath, his closeness and the way his arms felt on her, letting herself relax and the thoughts of the day drift in and out of her mind. And then, of course she remembered. The little girl.

“What is it, milaya? You tensed,” he asked gently, rubbing her back.

"Thinking about Natasha and Yana," she said. She thought of how happy she and Aleksander were to know that they would have a child of their own, and how utterly different the reality of two little girls was. One had a place to belong, because she was Grisha, but the other one, oh the other one - unwanted and yet claimed by a family that didn't truly desire her for who she was. Just for the work that she could do.

And how violent that family was to her.

"Aleksander-" Alina said, suddenly realizing something. She pushed herself up to sit as an idea started to form.

"What is it?" he asked, eyebrows knitting together as she stared at him, feeling nearly excited. Of course, she thought; *he* was her solution.

"I think I know what to do," she told him, folding her legs under her, ready to tell him everything.

"You do?" he asked mildly and sat right up himself, looking around for their bedclothes. When he didn't find any, he got up to his own dressing drawer and brought two nightshirts with him. She pulled on the one he gave her. "You're going to keep that, aren't you?"

"What if I do?" she teased as he neared to sit close to her.

"Tell me what you thought of, milaya," he said, moving an errand strand of hair behind her ear.

"Remember the rule you set? No violence? Well," she took a breath and started explaining, she watched as his expression changed from surprise to approval and then pride. His smile was somewhat smug as he moved closer still, to move her hair and observe her face.

"Well," he said, unable to contain a smile, "people don't surprise me often, Lady Kirigan," he said, and to her utter delight those words still made her feel ridiculously proud of herself, and then she realized, he was the first person who truly made her feel like that - proud of something she had accomplished. That nobody else could quite inspire the same feeling in her, strong and light and just good, when he looked at her with approval and admiration. "I am in agreement. I do want you to take a carriage, and both Ivan and Fedyor. No discussion."

His requests were perfectly reasonable, and she did plan to bring both heartrenders with her.

"Of course," she said, winding her arms around his neck. He looked at her fondly, the pride in his gaze only growing more intense.

"Well who would have thought. My little wife, thinking like a general would," he said, pulling her to lay down next to him and she weant easily.

"You rubbed off on me, it seems. Or ruined me," she said and yawned. "I don't care, as long as we help this child, but -"

"Yes?" he asked, his fingers playing with her hair again. It seemed like he was unable to let go of her. "Wasn't it worth it, ljubavi moja?"

Instead of answering him, she snuggled close and kissed him.

*

She told Genya she wanted her blackest kefta and barely any color on her face. Just a little bit of tailoring to set off her eyes, and her hair strictly arranged. Lady Kirigan, with just a tiny bit of gold on her sleeves, followed by heartrenders and charcoal dressed guards.

"A carriage?" Genya asked, following Alina, Fedyor and Ivan to see them on their way.

"We need to talk later," Alina told her.

"We do?" There was a slight surprise on Genya's carefully schooled face.

Alina smiled. "I *want* to talk to you. But first, I need to sort this out," she said.

"Then we shall talk," Genya said. Alina smiled again and followed Ivan and Fedyor into the carriage.

The ride was uneventful - Fedyor did ask how she was feeling and she just smiled and said she was doing okay. In reality she was nervous, and they probably knew that. Alina took a deep breath and looked at Ivan's steely face, at Fedyor's carefully composed expression and knew that no matter what happened, she was safe. They would never let anyone hurt her, and then she thought, she would never let anyone hurt either of them.

The carriage was slower than a horse, but eventually they reached the village. The people there greeted them, now going about their daily activities instead of waiting for the help to arrive. Alina noted how much it had changed from the beginning, becoming a place of life and living instead of being merely a shelter. If anyone thought four guards accompanying the Sun Summoner and two heartrenders were an odd sight, nobody commented, and a few children might have been confused, seeing fedyor looking so stern and strict, almost like Ivan.

Alina reached Ekaterina's house and took a deep breath.

"We're right here with you," Fedyor said.

Nearly two months earlier Alina had doubts as to if she should banish someone who hurt other people, if she was just or if she simply found plausible excuses for cruelty. But in this moment she did not have a single doubt, not even a trace of it when she knocked at the door, in the way that demanded it to be opened.

And open it did.

Ekaterina was on her own, with five tiny children and Alina wondered how many bruises their clothes were hiding.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“We have found your niece,” Alina said, her voice stone cold.

“Where is she?” Ekaterina asked. “I need her here to do her chores, not wandering around -”

“You will let us inside,” Alina spoke, and if some part of her was surprised with the way she did so, with the way she held herself, she did not let it show. She was the Lady Kirigan now, all of her focused on the way her role ought to be performed; her chin up and her shoulder straight, the way she saw Aleksander do. And she walked into the house that seemed bleak and dark, not because it held so little, but because the people in it filled it with anger and misery.

“What do you want? Where is the child?”

“I will be the one talking,” Alina told her as Ivan positioned himself between her and Ekaterina. “The girl was found barely alive. She is with my healers. I have seen what you've done to her,” Alina chose this point to make a pause and look at the other woman who still had the audacity to stare back. “I will remind you, Ekaterina, of what the General said. Anyone who commits violence will be banished from here -”

Ekaterina snorted. “Beating an unruly, spoiled brat who doesn't know her place is no violence -”

Ivan lifted an arm and the woman ceased talking at once. She might have been stupid, but the fear of heartrenders was nearly universal.

“Lady Kirigan said she will be the one talking. You will remain silent and will not be reminded of this again,” Ivan said with enough unkindness to make the other woman think she was in trouble.

“You are in luck, for General Kirigan does not know what you have done to the child of your sister,” Alina continued, using every word like a slicing knife. “Bruises, beatings and a broken arm, broken by twisting. That is not how an unruly child is disciplined, that is violence. And you will not counter my word. If the General finds out what you did, you will be banished. Your husband as well. Your children,” Alina paused, to look pointedly at the children who all looked at her with confusion and fear, and that bit she truly did not like. But it had to be done, and she had to be convincing. “Your children are at no fault for your misdoings. They can stay. But you will leave -”

“Moya soverenya -,” Ekaterina started but this time Ivan did intervene - not harshly enough to injure, but just enough for the woman to lose her breath and be forced to sit in a chair and listen.

“Or you could *avoid* that,” Alina said. “By giving up the child. She will not be your responsibility any more, and the General will not know what you have done.”

The woman breathed harshly, not saying anything. She looked up at Alina and Ivan with dread. Alina waited, counting soundlessly - one, two, three, four, five. When Ekaterina did not object, she stared her down once more. “I assume we have reached an agreement,” she said. And without turning back she walked out.

She did not turn around as they walked towards the carriage, and only as Fedyor closed the door, she let her composure crumble.

“You did well,” Ivan told her then. “People like that know only one language.”

Alina leaned back and rubbed her eyes. “Yes. The one of force and violence.”

“Exactly,” Ivan agreed.

Alina closed her eyes. She did not enjoy using it, and she wasn't sure what to make of the fact that the entire act, her impersonating what she imagined to be Aleksander's strictest persona, was in no way foreign or difficult to put forth. Well, she thought. Whatever that meant about her, one thing was certain - Natasha would be safe.

*

“Come with me,” she told Genya as they got back. Ivan and Fedyor would report to Aleksander, what Alina wanted and needed was to talk to her friend and to one more person.

“Where are we going?” Genya asked as she set aside her newest perfumes. Alina hoped Genya would not offer them to her, and thankfully, she did not. “You are awfully conspirative today, if I may say.”

“You may,” Alina answered and paused just before the door that was partially open. Alina closed it. “Okay, first I need to tell you something. There is no way you will not find out, considering... everything, and I don't want you to hear this from anyone but me.”

Genya's eyebrows rose delicately as she studied Alina's face.

“That sounds rather serious. Is everything okay?”

“I could say it's more than okay. I am with a child,” she said, observing Genya's surprise and then a smile that transformed her face in the most wonderful way, filling her eyes with both tears and joy.

“Oh my... Saints! Alina! That’s, that’s.... Saints, *what a surprise*,” she said happily, letting Alina pull her into a hug. They held each other and laughed and laughed. Genya pulled apart then, taking Alina’s hands, and smiled in a rare, unguarded way Alina did not see very often. “Oh, you *do* look happy,” she said. “Are you happy?”

“I am happy,” Alina told her, remembering their conversations. “I am -”

“I can see that,” Genya said, “In fact, I think the only people who cannot see it are those who do not have eyes. And what did I tell you?”

“Well, I listened to your advice,” Alina said, and then somewhat cheekily added, “Aren’t you happy?”

“Absolutely happy,” Genya answered and pulled Alina into another hug. “Where did you want to go? Does your husband know -”

“We’re going to the nursery and then to see little Natasha. He does not need to know about every step I make. I am not going outside the palace, and I am *certain* he will find me if he needs me.”

“Oh but I bet he would have Ivan and Fedyor follow you around literally everywhere?”

“He would,” Alina sighed. She was amused but she could bet Ivan would not be. He certainly did not need more stress. “Ivan and Fedyor do not deserve that,” she added.

“I doubt Fedyor would mind,” Genya said. “He does enjoy being in your service.”

“I know,” Alina answered, remembering her first days being back and wondering, constantly, if Fedyor was truly kind or simply trying to win back her sympathies and trust. Such a futile exercise of thought that was.

Walking next to Genya felt comfortable, even if the excitement from a little while ago did not fully go away. Alina told her friend about the village visit, about how it felt to stand up to Ekaterina, how it felt to be looked upon in fear. “It was just as you told me. The black kefta and the power it holds,” Alina said. “And I did not hesitate to use it. I did not debate with myself, the way I did with Igor.”

As expected Genya did not ask if Alina thought her actions were right.

“Did that not feel good? Knowing you could make someone’s life much better?”

“It did,” Alina said, weighing it all in her mind.

“That is what power is for. To change, where change is necessary,” they reached the nursery and Genya opened the door. They continued their conversation in slightly hushed tones, looking for little Yana and finding her, and her maid in the common room with other children. Alina explained that they wanted to take the little one to visit her sister. Yana smiled when Alina took her in her arms, content to play with the shiny embroidery of Alina’s black kefta. They walked to the infirmary ward, where Natasha was asleep. Genya and Alina sat near the little girl’s bed, Alina holding the younger child.

“Let’s wait a bit, perhaps she hears us and wakes up,” Alina said, finally feeling that she could relax. They would find a place for this little girl, Alina thought as she looked at Natasha, in the kitchens or with the seamstresses, they would raise her, all of them; she would learn to read and write, and she would learn skills to be her own person, and someone valued for the work she could do. And she would grow up with her sister, with her true family.

“They both look so sweet,” Genya said, making faces at Yana. The little girl laughed, extending her tiny arms to Genya, and Alina handed her over. She observed Yana’s fascination with Genya’s shiny long hair and smiled, wondering if her child would act like that; try to pull Genya’s hair and coax a smile from her. She wondered then about Ekaterina’s own little children in that cold and unwelcoming little house, stuck with a mother who was harsh and punitive, and not gentle, not even a little bit. “What are you thinking about?”

“Children,” Alina said, pensive. “Children left to the mercies of parents such as Natasha’s aunt.”

Genya’s face turned somber for a moment, but little Yana made her smile with her babbling. “It’s like everything else in this world. Some of us seem to have it easy, while the others face the hardship -”

“It’s different when you’re a child,” Alina said.

“What do you mean?” Genya asked, placing a gentle kiss on top of Yana’s head.

“A child isn’t only helpless. But also depending on the care of a grownup. And some children have the love,” Alina touched her stomach, realizing what she was doing only when she did it, “while others face abuse. And those who do... they’re left to the mercy of those who abuse them,” Alina was saying, thinking of Ana Kuya and all the harsh words the bitter woman yelled at her through her entire childhood. Genya’s face darkened then, in a way Alina had not seen before. “Rarely anyone can help them, the way I helped Natasha,” Alina said.

“That is true,” Genya said. Alina looked at Natasha as the girl sighed and stretched, a sure sign she was waking up. Alina gently touched Natasha’s arm, wondering if with all the bruises that were fading the bad memories also would; knowing that it wasn’t likely. But perhaps, perhaps, with love and care and proper treatment this little girl could flourish. Realizing that her eyes were welling up again, Alina wiped them and looked at Genya.

“See, Genya. If I could change anything ... I would change this. But I am not sure how... *yet*. ”

Okay, so now after you've read the chapter (I can't believe I reached #22, I am awful at updating multi chapter fics, and this one is certainly an anomaly, because I just keep going - and I guess part of the reason is the generous feedback that keeps me so motivated to tell this 'till the end) - now that we have somewhat wrapped up the story of two little sisters, I'd like to share where the inspiration for that came from. I work for social services, or more precisely, in child protection department and even today the children are sometimes helpless, and depending on truly abusive parents, and they're not protected as well as they should be. I wanted a broader theme for the second part of this fic, and I guess this is it - Alina using her power, her societal power, to change something substantial and real. (@ hithelleth you had a good guess last time). One thing that's good about this absolutely frustrating and stressful work is when you get a child away from someone who's treating them badly; when all the frustration and pointless paperwork finally makes sense, and I wanted to convey that exact feeling when Alina went to talk to the Horrible Aunt.

Few words on Ivan... When I started this I had no idea how to handle Ivan. I feel I've grown more comfortable with him, and he's grown as a character in this, from a guy who frowns and says uncomfortable things into, I hope, an interesting character. I'd like to do Ivan and Fedyor story from this universe, as they both fully deserve that (and I am open to asks).

Thank you to everyone sticking with me on this journey. It's mostly because of you that I keep writing. It's pretty late now and I'm going to crash into bed, and I hope I'll wake up to your thoughts and comments. <3

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Well, the legend says I somehow manage to post one chapter per week. I had few truly shitty days so I don't have too many things to say except I hope you enjoy this new part. This is probably the longest chapter so far. A new character turns up here, well not literally new - just someone I haven't written into the story so far.

Credits to Middlemarch for the curse word "volcra-shit"; which turns up in (I think) several fics of hers, most notably in "What it is to be a thin crescent moon" - if you haven't read that, go and read it <3

If you've enjoyed this, please leave a review! Give this girl some lovin'. Thoughts, questions, heck even prompts are always welcome.

If there was a more ridiculous way to spend her time than having tea with various noble ladies, Alina could not think of it. However the goal was to gather the funds for refugee and orphan charities, and Alina was ready to suffer through hours of idle conversation, and impress the stuffy, uptight noble ladies with how well read and well dressed she was. It wasn't always perfect or without a hitch, but even if Alina served as a fodder for their gossip - and she almost certainly did - the thing that mattered was the funds she was able to raise. She wasn't terribly worried about her reputation - she was the Sun Summoner - no amount of mean gossip was able to cancel that fact.

She was four months along now, slowly inching into fifth; having crossed into the second trimester of her pregnancy, and her stomach was getting bigger and round. The queasiness was gone, the coffee was tasting somewhat better and she wasn't falling asleep at random places; but she was still getting tired quickly. Aleksander would probably tell her to get more rest, she thought as she observed floral arrangements positioned around the big salon. She gazed at the flowers, the lovely white roses she wouldn't let him pluck for her and told herself, firmly, that she could miss him after she was done with this.

Genya entered the room, followed by several maids who brought in fine pastries and little cakes to go with the tea.

"I'm afraid there isn't a dress that's going to... *conceal* much any longer," Genya said with a sigh and an indulgent smile on her lips. "How are you feeling?"

"Bored and ...," Alina shrugged and paused.

"You miss him," Genya said.

"Trying not to, at least not now. This is much alike the last round of negotiations, and I need to do it -"

"And you will. Let them be stuffy and organize the fundraiser dinner and feel important. All you need to do is appear," Genya said. If sadness passed across Alina's face, she wasn't able to conceal it all that well. "He will be back before that. He is never away on campaigns longer than two months. Besides, he has something, *someone* to come back home to."

"If he's not back home soon, I really will be getting strange looks," Alina said, looking down on her stomach. Her dress was cleverly tailored and with the kefta over it, the slight bump was hidden. But the hints were there when she moved and when she was sitting, the slowly growing shape of pregnancy unmistakable on her slight frame. She was carrying herself differently as well, walking with a subtle sway as her weight arranged itself differently on her body. She would touch her stomach, especially when she was absent minded or thinking of Aleksander, who was now almost two months away, and all contact they've had were a couple of letters with precious few details. They were still written by his hand and Alina would look at them, almost every day, imagining his hands, his fingers, the way his hand moved as he wrote. They did not have the time to announce her pregnancy to the Tsar and the court, which also meant to the noble society, and Alina could not do it by herself. That did not mean the news of her pregnancy was non-existent - there was gossip everywhere, since the second time she missed her bleeding, and she was pretty certain that the entire country was now aware and informed that the Sun Summoner was expecting a child. Which placed Alina in a situation she chose to be amused by - the noble ladies were all aware of her pregnancy, but unable to ask any direct questions about it, and watching them squirm and pretend not to observe her figure was simply beyond amusing.

And, she couldn't wait to tell Aleksander.

She sighed. Did everything have to somehow go back to him?

She walked to the window and looked outside, and she could see the rooftops of the stables. She promised to go riding with him and they never got the chance, and they won't be able to do it for quite awhile now, wouldn't they? But even if she weren't pregnant, they wouldn't be able to go riding, because he wasn't here, he was somewhere near the Ravkan border with Shu Han, and each time she thought of it, her heart clenched at many and various thoughts of things that could happen. He could be shot or captured, and she knew what Shu did to Grisha, Saints only knew what they would do to *Shadow Summoner* if they could get their hands on him, and -

Her fingers curled around a curtain and she took a deep breath. She couldn't be thinking like that, she couldn't risk her anxious thoughts to put her child at risk. Aleksander would return, she told herself, he *would*, and she'd feel his arms around her and breathe in his scent and he'd tell her all those sweet words - she sighed and took another deep breath, frustrated with herself and the entire situation. She expected to miss him, but she never expected it to feel like this, this empty and painful pit in her chest. She thought, foolishly, that she would work through his absence, take walks and read the books, and take as much rest as he would want her to, but it hadn't been like that. She missed him in the mornings as she stared at his empty chair during breakfast; she missed him as she pitifully looked at his untouched pillow, the sleep eluding her. She missed him each

time she looked at her stomach, wishing she could see his reaction to the sight. She missed his voice, his scent, his words, the little sounds he made; the way he quirked his lips, just slightly, the way he looked at her after they've made love - she missed each and every little bit with the intensity that only kept getting worse.

She turned to look at Genya who finished arranging flowers in the center of the table. smoothed out the tablecloth and placed the teacups around.

"Come on, no more of that," she said. "Your husband wouldn't want you to be so sad, and I am sure he misses you too," she added and Alina laughed, because the thought of him missing her only made her chest ache more; and really, she was beyond help. Not that Genya didn't notice. "Oh, Alina. I'll stop - let's just get ready and deal with the pretty harpies and then we can go out for a walk. It's a lovely day outside."

*

The tea took longer than either Genya and Alina anticipated. Alina was exhausted after it, with a slight headache and sore back, forced to give in to what her body demanded - rest. She was trying to sleep, but she could not - there was something undefined at the edge of her thoughts bothering her, completely separate from her thoughts of Aleksander, a nagging feeling that kept spreading like a stain over the cloth. She was contemplating getting up when she heard a knock, thankful that her pitiful rest was interrupted, glad that there was someone on the other side of the door she could talk to.

Alina was greeted with the splash of red as Ivan and Fedyor greeted her. She rubbed her eyes and took in the tight set of Ivan's jaw, softening slightly when she hid a yawn behind her palm.

"Oh I am sorry, moya soverenya," he spoke, as if he was berating himself. "We shouldn't have -"

"Oh nonsense," she said, opening the door wider so that they could step inside. "I was not sleeping, just attempting some rest. I am pregnant, not sick," she said, meeting Fedyor's conspiratory gaze. While he was the one who encouraged her desire for exercise, such as regular walks, Ivan was fretting over her almost as much as Aleksander would, acting as his successful substitute in terms of worry. Thankfully, the two of them were not court ladies who needed a special sort of official announcement; besides they knew about her pregnancy before even she did. She looked at Ivan again who relaxe just a fraction, but his face and his eyes told her something had happened. "I assume there's something important you came to tell me?"

Ivan and Fedyor shared a look, almost as if they were deciding who should break whatever news they had, and in that moment she thought it was about Aleksander. She could feel the color drain from her face as her heart started beating frantically.

"Oh no, no, it's not about the General," Fedyor hurried to say. "To best of our knowledge he is fine and his campaign is going well, it's something else -"

"New refugees," Ivan said, knowing well enough that no special introduction was necessary.

"Oh," she said. Of course they were upset. This was something where Aleksander was necessary. Alina looked between them, meeting Fedyor's steady gaze and Ivan's willingness to do anything that might be necessary. She took a deep breath. "Okay. Okay... what... What do we need to do? How much time do we have for any sort of preparation?"

Ivan took a deep breath. "A week, I suppose. There are several houses empty, and new ones could be built. The old theater building is not in use any more, but it would do, until we have somewhere where people could live."

"Do we know how many people are coming?"

"The information we have right now is about thirty families," Fedyor said. Alina nodded - less than the first time around, she thought, but still, a lot of people. However they had experience now, they knew what to expect and what to prepare for. "There's a regiment of the First Army near Os Alta," Fedyor informed her. "They will help build the new homes."

"That's great," Alina said, looking at them, covering her stomach with her hand, a gesture that steadied her. They all needed Aleksander right now, but they were able to do this on their own. They *had* to be. "Okay.... we need to start, right now. We need a list of available supplies, we will need clothes, blankets, firewood..."

"I will see that you have a full list by tomorrow morning," Ivan said.

"How soon can the First Army start building?"

"They are on leave, not otherwise occupied. As soon as you command," Fedyor informed. "Their commander is ready to cooperate."

"Then I would like them to start working right away," Alina said, knowing that was not how an order was issued, but trusting that Ivan would know exactly what to do, and how.

*

The following days felt somewhat like the period when Aleksander was ill. Alina was trying to run an emergency, and without Ivan it wouldn't have been possible. Alina supposed he would prefer to be on the front, alongside Aleksander, before this new crisis occurred. Right now he didn't seem to regret Aleksander's decision to leave both him and Fedyor at Little Palace, with the task of keeping Alina safe wherever she went.

She was back to going into the refugee village on a daily basis, attracting glances the same way she did among the court ladies, and while some of those looks were fond, some decidedly were not. Every once in a while she would run into Ekaterina who never failed to give her an ugly look.

"I could warn her," Ivan offered but Alina declined.

"We need these people to cooperate," she told him. "I would guess not all of them are going to be delighted with new incoming refugees."

"They're refugees themselves," Ivan said, frowning. "One would suppose they would understand the plight. But I suppose you are right. Compassion is something that doesn't come easily to all of us."

"It doesn't if we're not taught compassion," Alina observed. "Especially not if all we do is fight to survive, and you think others are there to take from you something you need."

"Then we need to make it clear nobody would fall short because we're helping more people," Fedyor said. "I think it's best if Dimitri communicates this, until the General is back. It's not that I don't believe in your abilities, *moya soverenya*, I just don't want you exposed to an angry mob of people."

Alina smiled, her hand resting on the swell of her stomach. "Your concern is noted and appreciated," she said.

Alina mostly observed the preparations, noting how quickly the new houses were built, when so many hands were involved in building them. Still she feared it wouldn't be enough, that there wouldn't be enough food or warmth, or safe space for everyone who came here looking for it. Most soldiers greeted her politely, and she felt a confusing mixture of emotions seeing the First Army uniforms, because not that long ago she wore one herself.

She had to see the old theater building today, she thought, she needed a list of supplies they still needed, she had to see for herself if upper rooms were fixed, she had to -

Walking through a half built camp she stopped, suddenly aware that someone was staring at her. Someone familiar and tall.

"Mal," she said, as he tossed a hammer aside, realization and recognition fixed on his face.

"*Alina*?" he said as his eyes searched her from top to toe, and then he was leaving his spot and walking towards her. Fedyor and Ivan reacted instantly, each at one side of her. At her right, Ivan tensed and she looked at him, trying to assure him, or perhaps pleading, trying to let him know that she didn't want harm to come to anyone. Ivan nodded, his eyes sharp and hard.

"*Moya soverenya*?" Fedyor asked, noticing the look that passed between Ivan and Alina.

"What is this?" Mal asked as he came closer, but not as close as he would probably like. "This is how you live now? Followed by Darkling's watchdogs?"

"Hello Mal," Alina said, trying to reign in her voice. She noticed how Fedyor looked at Ivan again.

"*Hello Mal*? What, like we saw each other yesterday at a fair? What - do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

Yes, she thought, yes she did. And at the same time she... she was so preoccupied *with herself*, worried about herself, and focused on herself, that she didn't worry about him. She didn't worry because the moment she learned he was freed she knew he would be fine. Because there were so many things going on. Because -

Alina could literally feel anger vibrate off Ivan as his entire posture tensed.

"I would choose my words carefully around Lady Kirigan," Ivan said and Alina felt upset. Not because of Ivan's reaction, because that was what Ivan usually did - but the way Mal looked at her upon hearing how Ivan addressed her.

"Let him speak," Alina said quietly. "I owe him that much," she said.

"You want to speak *like this*?" Mal asked, his tone making her feel worse. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Fedyor's expression harden. She supposed this really wasn't what Mal deserved - but this was what she agreed to, Aleksander's terms about her going outside of the palace completely certain, and *moreso* Alina agreed with them all - asking Fedyor and Ivan to leave would mean to distrust them, something two of them did not deserve; it would mean to throw away everything she and Aleksander agreed upon, and she realized what a precious balance it all was; because she couldn't honor one man without hurting the other.

In the end the choice was easy. If she had to choose the man in her life whom she did not want to hurt, she did not need to think at all.

"They can hear anything you might want to say," Alina told Mal, bracing herself, not because of what Ivan and Fedyor might think of her. She watched Mal grow furious, she could see the judgement clearly etched on his face, something she never wanted to see on his face directed at her. Something in his expression closed off and hardened, making him look almost like a stranger to her. What did you think would happen, she thought. Of course this was how he would react.

He certainly didn't spare her everything that was probably boiling within him for a long time.

"So it's all true? I honestly didn't *want* to believe everything I was hearing, but apparently..." he paused, looking her all over, her neatly done hair, her freshly looking face, her delicately made kefta. "You chose a *comfortable* life, didn't you? I can't believe it - all the time you complained about the cold and poor meals and walking around. I should have known -"

"I chose the peace treaty," she said, cutting him off, her own voice turning hard. If Aleksander was here he would simply step in front of her, but she had no choice but to face him.

"That's volcra shit, and you know it," Mal continued. "You chose the *Darkling*, after everything? You chose -"

Alina could feel her own anger bloom, like a blood stain over a fresh wound as he continued, not caring for the fact that his words were hurting her, and that, that wasn't Mal she knew. The way he looked at her, like she betrayed him, like she did the unthinkable - and she did, but not in the way he was implying -

"I chose to save your life," she said. "That is the truth, Mal, without this treaty you would have been dead. It's what I chose, and you are still breathing air. You have *no right* to criticize my life, and how I chose to live it -"

"You seriously want me to think that? That this is somehow about me? You ... for Saints sake, are you *pregnant*?"

"How... this is truly not your concern -" she said, returning his gaze even though everything inside of her hurt. She was holding her hand on her stomach and yes, it was obvious. Yes, he could see, and no, she did *not* want to tell him, not when he was judging her like this, when he had no idea what she had been through; when everything he knew of her struggle was wrong. Mal's face twisted in something that looked almost like disgust, and at that moment she did not want the conversation to continue. She did not want someone whom she loved her entire life to look at her and think of her child as something abhorrent and wrong.

"You're pregnant? You actually - did he force himself on you?"

Fedyor stepped in front of her then, his hands raised enough to strike.

"That's *enough*. You may know Lady Kirigan, you might even think of yourself as her friend, but you won't be allowed to talk to her like this. Go away," he said. Mal kept on looking - because apparently he was either stupid or unafraid in face of two highly trained heartrenders, or because he was angry enough not to care. Alina realized that she stepped closer to Ivan, not wanting to believe that this was the reality. Mal gave her one more hurt look and then he left.

Before she could say anything she felt Ivan's hand on her shoulder, and then she felt his power washing over, sure and steady. Her heart slowed down and the tight knot in her chest loosened.

"What even was that," Fedyor said, his own anger obvious in his voice as Alina all but sagged after Ivan pulled his hand back.

"That was mister Orestev," Ivan said, like it was explanation enough, and perhaps it was. "I think it's best if we head back."

"The theater building," Alina tried to protest, but Ivan's expression told her he wasn't willing to discuss.

"I will take care of that, you don't have to worry. This conversation upset you -"

Alina knew that he felt exactly how unsettling it was. She nodded and held onto Fedyor's arm when he offered it. They hurried through the village, as much as they could, back to the carriage that awaited them. Once inside she could drop the pretense, leaving the role of Lady Kirigan on its wooden floor as the driver spurred the horses into motion. She remembered the first time she rode in a carriage with Fedyor and Ivan, remembered how she felt; terrified and out of her depth, impossibly separated from the rest of the world by being, again, different than anyone else. But that time around, she knew she had a friend out there, she trusted that Mal would not begrudge her for not knowing that she had powers, not truly realizing what she was. And he did not, not in any obvious way - until today. She sighed and wiped her eyes, aware of how the heartrenders were looking at her.

"We grew up together," she said, not sure whom she needed to justify. She shook her head and shrugged. "When I didn't have anyone, I had Mal," she said.

"That is not how a friend behaves," Fedyor observed.

"I suppose not," she said quietly. Ivan reached inside his kefta and then leaned forward to offer his handkerchief - red like his colors, and soft like the power he soothed her with. Alina dabbed her eyes and held onto the fabric, staring through the window for a while, until she finally felt she could look at both of them. "He acted as if I... *betrayed* him."

"I would say that's exactly how he was acting," Ivan said. "You do not owe him anything. Least of all to betray yourself."

She sighed. He was right. She knew he was right - but - she also knew that people who knew you had expectations of you; people you were close to, people who knew how you looked when you were trying not to cry. They expected to always know you, they expected you to act the way they deemed right - and Mal certainly had expectations, didn't he, although he never voiced them aloud. It was *unfair*, she thought, it was unfair because he thought she would always be his little friend with the crush on him, and even more unfair that he obviously thought he had any right to have expectations. That she somehow was not allowed to make choices merely because he had them.

And ultimately, it wasn't even about the choices. Alina placed her hand on her stomach and sighed, remembering what Mal told her after the Fold. *He said he'd just wait for you to stop being angry at him. Imagine that, Alina. As if you could ever forgive him for what he did.*

Well, she thought, Mal was wrong about her unwillingness to forgive - *she* was wrong about it too; even as she accused Aleksander of horrible things and told herself she was caged by a monster. Even then there was a part of her that wanted to forgive him. Why else would her own mind scream at her so loudly?

And was she wrong to forgive Aleksander? Was she wrong, when all he offered her was kindness and love?

"I know. I still feel bad," she told Ivan. His gaze was serious, but there was nothing in it that made her feel at fault.

"We know," Fedyor said.

*

That evening Alina asked Genya to help her. She could unbraid her hair and take a bath all by herself, but she did not want to. She did not want to be in her rooms by herself, and she did not want to ruminate on Mal's words, to search her soul and question every decision she made and wonder how all the steps she took were transgressions against him, and some unspoken pact he expected her to honor. Alina wanted to be calm, but when Genya showed up, she threw herself in Genya's embrace and cried.

"Did they tell you?" Alina asked, almost wishing that Fedyor ranted his heart out. It would mean that she didn't have to.

"No, but they did tell me to go to see you," Genya said, tenderly stroking Alina's hair. "What happened? Who upset you? Should I turn them into a frog?"

"Oh, Genya -" Alina laughed and wiped her face.

"Let's get you settled, and you can tell me about what happened," she said.

With her hair combed and the bath done, Alina and Genya curled among the cushions on the bed that Alina never used, and never slept in. Relaxed and warm, with a box of chocolates between them (Genya refused to say who managed to get them) Alina was staring at the ceiling and recounting her sudden meeting with Mal.

"...and it wasn't that I wouldn't tell him - Saints of course I would, he was always my best friend - it was how he accused me of - of -"

"Of choosing someone who isn't him?" Genya asked, completely deadpan. Alina sighed.

"When you put it like that -"

"Well it *is* like that," Genya said, picking another candy.

"He did say that *now* he *sees* me -"

"*Now*?"

"Now, meaning after I learned to summon. After it turned out I was the Sun Summoner and not just... Just his friend," she said.

"Saints, Alina. He told you *that*?" Genya's expression was scandalized enough to prompt Alina into unsteady laughter. "Because, oh Saints, that's not how you tell a girl that you like her! You don't decide she's worth your attention now that she's special -"

"It... is bad," Alina said. "He also commented on *how much* I eat."

"He what?! Oh I wish Nina Zenik was here," Genya said.

"Who is Nina Zenik?"

"Someone who would punch a man in the face if he told a girl she's eating too much," Genya answered. "Nina is a heartreder. She was on a mission, and -"

"What happened to her?" Alina asked, sitting up a bit, looking for a position that was more comfortable.

"We don't know. We haven't heard from her in... quite awhile. Oh, but she *would* have liked you. And you would have liked her," Genya nodded knowingly, offering another chocolate to Alina. "Anyway... I think your friend expected that you would keep yourself for him? He expected to have you, while failing completely to be straightforward about it, and now he is realizing that he has lost you. That you made a different choice, which was fully within your right."

"We have spent... several months together? And he truly never did - he was never straightforward about any sort of intimacies, or," Alina sighed. "He never showed that he wanted anything besides friendship. And I do not read minds."

"Exactly," Genya said. Alina hugged her knees, thinking how very soon she wouldn't be able to do it at all. "You are married and entitled to enjoy your marriage any way you please. It is as simple as that."

"I do enjoy it," Alina said, stretching her lips in a wistful smile. Genya nodded.

"Well. I think Mal is actually remarkably lucky," Genya said.

"How so?"

"Imagine if your husband was there today," Genya winked.

"Oh," Alina winced a bit. "I honestly do not want to. I just... I just want him to come back soon."

*

Three days passed in preparation and haste. Despite not wanting to run into Mal again, Alina went to oversee the works each day, the responsibility for the people who would arrive to seek help weighing heavy on her. They needed more blankets, they needed more firewood; the new houses were being nearly finished, yet she feared they would have to use military tents as well. Although she had seen Mal a few more times, he didn't try to approach her, and she wasn't sure what hurt more - the fact that he did not, or the way he looked at her each time.

With everything going on, she just wanted Aleksander to come home.

Despite being tired, each night she fought the sleep to come and take her, feeling like she slept for merely ten minutes, even though she did not wake through the night. Genya urged her to relax, to rest more, but Alina knew that the physical rest was not the matter that troubled her. The untouched pillow on her right *was*.

That evening she had a bath, tried to read her book and finally gave up, dimming the lamp and pulling Aleksander's pillow right next to hers.

She woke suddenly, to a feeling of bed dipping next to her, someone moving her hair away from her face as she lifted her head to see. It was Aleksander, his hand still slightly chilly, his face smelling of his soap.

"Shhh, milaya, it's me, it's still night," he said, placing a kiss on her temple. "Go back to sleep -"

"Oh Sasha," she was pushing herself to sit up before he could even say another thing, reaching blindly for him as he leaned close.

"My sweet," he said into her hair. "My Alina, my love -"

"Oh finally," she said, as he wrapped her in his arms, "Finally, *finally*."

"Did you miss me, my love?" he asked, moving just an inch to look at her.

"*Unbearably* so," she said. "Sasha please, turn on the lamp. Please, I want to see you -"

"You should rest, milaya -"

"No, no, I can rest later, oh please Sasha," she whispered, although they were on their own and nobody could hear them talk.

"All right," he said, parting from her only to turn on the light. It filled the room with the golden glow and when she was finally able to see his face, she let out a breath of relief.

"Oh you're here, and I am not dreaming," she said, as he moved back to her, to pull her into his embrace, cup her cheek and kiss her lips, her eyelids, her cheeks. "Oh, wait, wait -" she said and took one of his hands, placing it on her stomach. He couldn't see due to her wide nightdress but the moment he could feel it, his eyes went wide.

"*Oh*, milaya," he whispered, tracing the roundness under his hand and looking at her in wonder. "Look how you've grown round -"

"Yes I did," she said, feeling so ridiculously proud, pressing her face to his and seeking out his lips. With a hand on her belly and his lips on hers she felt like she was finally breathing air. She pressed herself up, fully against him, climbing his lap and tugging at his nightshirt.

"Alina, my sweet, you... you should rest -" he said with his forehead against hers, even as she painted patterns across his chest, and his hands teased her through her shift.

"I don't want to rest," she nearly whined into his neck, relishing the moan that tugged from his throat. "I've been resting all this time, and it wasn't restful at all. I want *you*," she said and then he was finally kissing her in earnest, without restraint or second thought. She pulled him down, to rest over her, she spread her legs, her lips eager against his as he struggled to get his breeches off and pull her nightdress away. He only kissed her when they parted, leaving her warm and wanting him, and now he was finally home, finally there for her to touch and feel him touch her. His hand paused on the swell of her stomach and he pulled away just to look, desire mixed with tenderness as he took in all the ways her body had changed.

"Look at this," he said, moving down her body to kiss the gentle swell and press his face against it. "My love, my darling," he said between the kisses, his hands seeking, teasing, finding way between her thighs as anticipation knotted tight in her chest.

"Sasha," she breathed when he finally touched her between her legs, finding her already completely wet. "Yes," she whispered as he slid his fingers inside, to touch and tease her, his lips against the skin of her stomach, his beard soft and wonderful. He moved between her legs then and she pushed herself up to watch him as he put his mouth on her, only she couldn't, her head falling back to pillows immediately as the pleasure steadily spread through her veins. She wanted it to last forever, but she was so high strung from missing him for so long, so tightly wound that it only took mere minutes until she felt herself dissolve under his mouth.

When he moved over her again, she felt like she could cry, the empty pit in her chest finally melting away. He kissed her sweetly, her neck and face and lips and then paused, his body nestled between her legs.

“Can you go on, my love? Or should I stop?”

She shook her head, her hands on his bearded cheeks. “No, no, don’t you dare stop,” she said and he grinned tenderly before he pushed into her body. He moved slowly, until her tight hold on him relaxed and desire took her over again, and all she could do was give in and lose herself in him, weak and needy sounds struggling free from her throat, until another climax washed over her again and tipped him over the edge along with her. He stayed over her for a while, pulling out and adjusting just a bit so as not to crush her with his full weight, but his arm across her chest and his leg between hers felt wonderful and warm. Alina yawned, tired and truly relaxed for the first time in months. Aleksander kissed her lips slowly, pressing his nose against her cheek.

“What a lovely welcome home, my sweet,” he said, caressing down her body until his hand was splayed over her stomach again. Alina smiled.

“Did you expect any less?” she teased, her chest finally feeling sated and full. He shook his head, his smile blissful and wide. She wanted to look at it each day until the end of her days.

“Each day and night I thought about this,” he said, placing kisses along her face. “About you. About our child.”

“I don’t want you to ever leave again,” she said.

“I don’t ever want to leave like this, my sweet. It had been too long. Unbearable,” he said.

“But it’s over now,” she snuggled close to him, to feel his warmth with every inch of her body. He wrapped her safely in his embrace.

“It’s over, and I am here,” he said. “I was told a lot had happened,” he added, his lips sweet and soft against her forehead.

“Yes... and there are things I need to tell you. But tomorrow. It can wait until tomorrow,” she told him and he nodded.

“Of course. Rest with me now,” he told her and it was All Alina needed to finally sleep.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Hello! Here's a new, somewhat shorter chapter (shorter than the last one), in which Alina and Aleksander get to reconnect and talk, after his absence from Little Palace. I am choosing to end the chapter now, because the rest that comes before the next big plot point would probably take another week to write, and I really prefer this rhythm of posting, one chapter per week, which helps me keep my pace and hopefully, means the time you have to wait for the new chapter is not too long.

Comments and questions and even prompts are always welcome - and now I am heading to bed, hoping to find replies that I can respond to in the morning. Happy reading and enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina lay in bed, her back against Aleksander's front, his slow breathing soothing and soft in her ear. She was rested, and finally relaxed, and she finally felt the blissful warmth of his body right next to hers - and yet her mind was troubled, and she thought herself foolish for it.

Technically she did not run from Mal. Ivan and Fedyor made Mal go away, and in all following occasions they made sure he wouldn't come near to upset her further - and there were several things that bothered her about this situation. He was her *friend* - he used to be one, she thought. Or was he? Was he just pretending? Was everyone like that, truthful and loyal and supportive until you've pushed them in a place that hurt sufficiently so they'd turn on you? She curled more tightly on her side, focused on the weight of Aleksander's arm across her waist. Didn't she do the very same to Aleksnader, turn on him after she was hurt and convinced that he was using her? Didn't she run away and refuse all his reasoning and attempts to tell her his view? Alina slowly turned, one hr back and then to her other side, to face Aleksnader who still slept.

She had made a choice. She thought about it while watching the way his chest softly rose with each breath. It didn't seem like much choice at all at first; and then when she thought she had no more choices, but to be his prisoner, she found more, and it determined her life. She *made* this, she chose this with all the little things she decided to do. What did Mal expect? That she would rather be a prisoner than at least try to make a difference? Did he expect her to live stone cold and detached from everyone, waiting for something that would never come, just because she owed him something they never defined in words?

Aleksander sighed and opened his eyes - she watched as his eyes focused, his gaze softened and he smiled. Saints, she thought, should she allow anyone the right to judge her for this? For being loved? For *loving* ?

She moved to him, to his utter delight, and kissed him with a hand in his hair, her body pressed to his.

"Milaya," he said into her kisses and she felt she could dissolve into his warmth. She kissed him until she let go of her thoughts, of the anxious tension lingering in her, and she was finally blissfully happy in his arms, letting him touch and study her in the dawning light of the morning. "Look at you," he said, face pressed against her neck. He seemed to be content there, with one arm around her, breathing her in like the comfort, like she was his lifeline. For some reason her eyes started to water, maybe because she missed him so much, or maybe because carrying his child made her more sensitive in every way. He moved, looked up at her as if sensing it - and most probably he did - kissing her tenderly and moving hair away from her face. "Why tears, my sweet?"

And it was too much. Too much of everything, and she just wanted to get lost, if only for a moment.

"Will you hold me, please?"

"Of course," he told her, pulling her to him and wrapping his body around her. And it was... *heavenly* , it was everything she wanted and needed for so long. "What happened, my love?"

"I will tell you," she said, face pressed against his skin. "When we get up. I want to stay like this a bit longer."

She could hear a smile in his tone when he spoke. "Of course." And then he held her, he held her close just like she wanted, he held her as long as she wanted it.

*

"The audience with the Tsar... It could be unpleasant," Aleksander said, his fingers carefully gathering Alina's hair between his fingers. She sat in front of the mirror, her own room pleasantly warmed by the new day's sun; and she was about to brush and braid her hair when he walked in, a smile on his lips, looking comfortable in his loosely tied robe. A sight that spoke of home more than any other.

"Unpleasant... how?" she was seeking out his eyes in the mirror, when he'd look up from his work to meet her gaze. "Apart from the usual unease? I never felt particularly good there."

His grin was half understanding, half indulgence, and his hands were lighter than Genya's as he took to work.

"I share the sentiment," he said. She looked at him with surprise on her face.

"You truly mean that?"

He paused again to look at her in the mirror. "It's like a constant, ever evolving game of chess," he said. "It's tiresome. I am a court member, which makes you one as well. And normally, we would have to ask a permission to get married -"

"A permission - wait, really?"

"Yes. The Tsar enjoys the idea of control over other's lives. But the circumstances were unique... and by marrying you I tied West Ravka into a complicated political deal, and tied their hands with it too"

"You ended a civil war," Alina said. "How is that complicated?"

"I may have ended a civil war, but I haven't eliminated everyone who was behind it," he said, observing his work on her hair. "There are Zlatan's men in the First Army, in the West in particular. Zlatan is out there, somewhere as well. The ones who still want West Ravka to secede are still there, they're just hiding. I put a stop to that, temporarily, or it looks like that at least." His hands paused at her shoulders. "The Tsar is aware of this, which is why he ignored the fact that I did not ask his permission to marry you. But that doesn't mean we can ignore the rest of the court's customs, no matter how ridiculous they are," he said.

"I understand," she told him.

"That's not all, though. There is Apparat, and as you know, he is the advisor to the Tsar -"

Alina frowned. "Yes. Ugh, will he be there? I never liked him," she said, observing how Aleksander braided her hair, wondering who taught him to do it, and like with everything he did, his actions were practical and precise, and the result good. Aleksander smirked.

"I do not know anyone who genuinely likes him. But he is the religious authority and the Tsar keeps him as a valued advisor, because people value their religion. And thus... we need to meet Apparat's approval. Or at least, the appearance of his approval. In reality Apparat serves only himself," Aleksander said, offering Alina his hand. She stood up, turning to face him.

"And how do we do that?" she asked, adjusting her dressing gown, ready to go down to the kitchens and look for her coffee. Aleksander cupped her face in his palm, smiling.

"The news of a living saint expecting a child should be exciting enough. We need to humbly ask for his blessing and guidance. Or at least *I* do, as you are our Sankta, and I am not to let you down"

Alina gave him an amused smile. "He is not a stupid man. Does he not sense your ... disdain?"

"Oh he knows we are not allies. But as long as he does not know my plans ..."

"I see," Alina said. "And this is why the everlasting game of chess is played?"

He hummed and kissed her forehead. "Precisely. And that is still not everything you need to be aware of," he told her. "Vorkoff, the commander of the First Army is here, and there will likely be talks about Monseno, since his units were stationed there. And since we still do not know who is behind the attacks -"

"Do you think it could be him?" Alina asked. He gave her an appreciative look, nothing short of proud and indulging.

"Thinking like a general would," he said.

"Am I not the general's bride, his wife and his love?" she said, hugging his waist, her chin against his chest and her eyes still holding his own. Aleksander's smile only grew, his dark eyes set upon her. She felt like the most precious being to exist, bathed in that warmth.

"You are all of that and more," he said softly. "Never be certain you know everything, milaya. We only know that which we can prove. I expect Vorkoff to insist on tearing the monastery down. I would let him battle about it with the Apparat, who will likely use the fact of your pregnancy as a sign from Saints and Old Gods that anything religious should not be touched or we would lose the mercy of the heavens -"

"How ridiculous," Alina said. "How uncomfortable, actually." It was her life, not theirs.

"Yes. But he knows where his power comes from... less monastery and churches -"

"Of course. Those are his troops," she looked down at her stomach, placing a hand over the swell of it. "I never thought this... would be a political bargaining chip -"

Aleksander placed a hand on her shoulder. "So are our entire lives, milaya," he said, his hand following hers, resting atop their child. "I will protect you. Both of you."

"We will both protect our child," she said, looking at him with determination. This fight wasn't solely his. "But before we do this... there is something I wanted to tell you. I had an... unpleasant encounter a couple of days ago."

His expression changed to worry as she sighed through the tension that tightened in her throat. Would he be angry with her? What would he say? She needed and wanted to share this with him, though, whatever his reaction might be.

"I saw Mal," she said. His eyes darkened, but underneath that she could see a trepidation, an almost fear that he pushed beneath his shadows. "Sasha," she took his hands in hers, to let him know she was here, that she wanted to be here. That there was no contest between her childhood infatuation and everything she felt for him. "I saw him among the soldiers sent to build the homes for new refugees. I did not expect it, and I did not know he would be there," she said, taking a steadying breath. "And it did not go well."

"How so?" he asked, soft and serious.

"He was furious with me," she looked down even if she did not want to. His hand reached for her face, to slowly lift it so his eyes could meet hers. "He did not understand... any of my life now."

"You do not owe him an excuse," Aleksander said, a slight possessive undertone to his edged voice. "Your life is yours to live it the way you choose," he said, and she could hear a veiled plea in it. Oh, as if she could, would ever leave him.

"I know that. But you do not expect a friend to judge you the way he judged me," she said and he listened, attentive and dark, and she did not fail to notice how he was letting her tell everything she needed to. "And it bothers me. What he said and -"

"I can have him sent away," he said over a held breath. Alina shook her head.

"No. That's not what I want," she said, his hands in hers. "What bothers me is that we left. Ivan and Fedyor, they sent him away before I could ... say something," she said and he studied her, realization rising in his dark eyes.

"It sounds to me like you want to speak your mind," he said. "You want to be heard," he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"I think so," she said. "I... it's ... unfair. I never had a family that I could remember, never had much, except for him. We grew up together. And when we grew... he had girls, lots of them and I -," she looked down again, thinking how foolish it had been. How naive and weak to hold onto those feelings, hoping someday they would be returned, when there was no indication of it? And he had... known of that, didn't he? He had to, she realized, when he expected her to live as a married woman who still kept a flame for him, like a candle melting into the ground, only to have its hope for light snuffed out. Old hurt flared within her chest as she looked at her husband, willing and eager to prove that she did choose right. "Did you know he told me that he could see me after I left? After I was the Sun Summoner?"

The twin of her anger flashed inside Aleksander's eyes. "And did he not see you before? Were you not good enough for him?" he asked and she did not answer - she did not need to.

"He kept telling me to keep my powers hidden and with each day I felt worse -"

At that Aleksander frowned. "And that harmed you," he said. "I will give him the benefit of the doubt for he very likely does not know what it is to keep your powers subdued. What it does to a Grisha. You were thin and frail when you first came here, and it was because you were wasting away due to suppression of your powers. You were not meant to do so, no Grisha is... it's how adult Grisha in hiding were always discovered. Being weak and sickly and never able to recover. Only when we are one with our powers can we flourish," he told her. Alina wondered if she could ever fall with a child without her powers, if she could sustain a pregnancy; or if there would come a time when she'd become bedridden and so weak, she wouldn't be able to stand. "One can not love the sun and at the same tell it not to shine," he said. "You were born to shine. Shame that he could never appreciate it. It's his loss," he said, tender and adoring, and the way he looked at her soothed that old ache, the hollowness of being plain and small, and never important enough.

Alina sighed. The uncomfortable feeling in her chest was not solely about Mal's judgement or the fact that Alina chose the perceived enemy. It was the knowledge that her past, one shared with Mal, was not her home; not the place that was better or safer for her. She could have spent her adult days in that field with him, and she would waste away while holding his hand. He would not understand and he could not help her - and Alina wondered if he would care to; had he known the price of that help. Just like a shoe too small, that kept hurting her feet, Alina had grown out of it, and it had to be discarded and exchanged. It was never about mal, she thought. It was about where she belonged.

"Sasha?" she asked.

"Yes, my sweet?"

"Hold me, please," she said, just to revel in the knowledge that this was home.

*

Aleksander returned around the time for lunch. Alina was busy with her personal correspondence, regarding the fundraiser she was organizing, and signing off supplies lists for the Palace when he walked into her study.

"Here you are," he said, as she took in the appearance of her room, and obvious signs that she had been working here - reports, maps, letters; books and documents, her kefta folded over a chair because the day was getting quite warm, and ink stains on Alina's fingers. He smiled fondly, observing and trying to fit himself into her space.

"Hello you," Alina replied, setting down the letter she was reading. "Back already?"

"I may have run away," he said, hands behind his back, walking slowly around her working desk.

"Oh no. You have deserted your post? Abandoned the Tsar and all those stuffed up nobles? What will they do now?" She was rewarded with an amused smile and a playful glint in his eyes.

"I requested an audience for both of us, with the Tsar, and he decided to grant it in two days," Aleksander said. "Then he dismissed me."

Alina frowned. "That seems strange. I expected he would hog your entire day after your campaign."

"As did I," he told her, his elegant fingers closing around skilfully craver back of a heavy wooden chair. He drew it close to her desk, so he could sit opposite her. "This is an out of character behavior," he said. "Tsaritsa seemed very tense and nervous all along, and Vorkoff was there as well. All in all, very curious and perhaps not completely unexpected -"

"How so?"

"The Tsar's health is deteriorating," Aleksander said. "He brought Vorkoff because he doesn't trust me. He is just not ready to make a move against me. Yet."

Alina felt chills going down her spine as the words and their implications settled in the pit of her stomach. "What does all of this mean, Aleksander?"

"I don't know, milaya. *Yet*. I am merely assuming that the Tsar is expecting an attack. A treason perhaps, which would not be unheard of. One emperor falls ill, the next one grabs his place," he said and she could imagine it quite well, as she remembered history lessons and books she had read hiding in the orphanage kitchen during long rainy days.

"Those who grab the throne tend to get rid of their opponents," Alina said slowly, her eyes holding his.

"Which is why I intend to take that throne... when it comes to it," he said, dark and determined and if she said she did not feel relief when her mind imagined it, she would be lying. "I do not intend to let anyone put a target on our heads. Decide what our lives are worth."

Alina took a deep breath, holding his gaze and placing her hands on her stomach. "So what do we do, Sasha?"

"We keep an eye on them, my love. And we keep ourselves ready," he told her. She nodded, thinking how not too long ago she would have opposed this. Now she knew better, and still didn't know enough.

"We keep ourselves ready," she told him. They sat in silence for a while and then he got up, walking around her desk to stand next to her chair and offer her his hand.

"We cannot do more right now. But I can show you something," he said, his eyes turning so wonderfully fond again.

"Yes?" she smiled, and it was easy to do so.

"Yes. I have brought you a couple of surprises," he said. "Would you like to see them before lunch?"

Alina nodded and took his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, here you go!

There's politics and intrigue in this chapter, and while it's not something I'm very used to writing about, I hope I didn't do too badly.

Someone asked the last time what happened to Aleksander's ambitions. Well, they're still there. Here you have an answer. What I find important though is that Alina can follow those ambitions with ambitions and determination of her own. So I am keeping - what I hope is - a measured pace and trying to develop this plot line.

We're not done with Mal, he will be back. I thought Alina needed time to process what happened and also a support from the person closest to her.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm sorry about the delay with this chapter - I was (and currently still am) sick; I felt really exhausted for a couple of days, so that's why my progress on any kind of writing was sadly slow. Right now I feel a bit better and I have managed to finish this up. Comments are definitely welcome, even more so now when I'm stuck at home. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What is it that you want to show me?” Alina asked, following Aleksander down the path towards the stables.

“Oh, just something,” he said, pulling her by the hand. All along they were followed by curious eyes, as the gossip and speculation about the nature of their relationship never quite ceased, but thankfully most of the Girsha and the staff were glad to greet them. She didn't bother hiding her happiness when she was with him like this - let them gossip about her all they wanted, talk about how her dress folded, how happy she looked when the General took her hand. How she was his favorite from the start, even when she didn't deserve it - how he was blind to her faults. So what if he was - if they both were? The way Aleksander held himself as they walked and people met them spoke of more than simple pride, and if Alina's kefta was showing her stomach more than concealing it, she did not care. What a profound statement, she thought, bold and perhaps reckless, showing the world that you were loved.

They reached the stables and entered, Aleksander first, leading Alina to the far end, towards the box near the one of his black stallion.

“Come look,” he told her and she approached to see. Inside was a horse - an elegant creature in yellow - golden color, its mane and tail completely white. Aleksander pulled out an apple from his pocket and the horse approached, taking the offering. The animal looked truly regal, and utterly different from all the horses in Little Palace's stables. “Her name is Mariska,” Aleksander said. “A Shu commander gave her to me, after surrendering. Turns out he had taken her from a Ravkan commander a few years back.”

Alina came closer and Aleksander gave her another apple. “Go on,” he said. She smiled, offering the fruit - Mariska happily accepted the offering. “She is patient and fairly tame, and by the looks of her, I would say... a wonderful horse suited for a Sun Summoner. Don't you think, milaya?”

No matter how many times he gave her gifts, she was still surprised each time he did it. And she truly did not expect him to bring her a horse. Especially not now. “Aleksander - oh it's such a pity I can't ride right now,” she said, petting the beautiful animal.

“But you would like to do it, if you could?” he asked. *You do like my gift?* remained unsaid.

“Of course,” she said, turning to him. “This is too much and you're spoiling me without any good reason.”

“*You* are the reason,” he told her. “And that's enough, for me. I may have something else for you? Not quite as big as a horse -”

She grinned. Oh, whom was she fooling? This was lovely, this feeling of being cared for and thought of.

“Then I want to see it,” she said.

“We need to go back to the Palace, then,” he said. “Because my other gift is on my desk.”

“You couldn't show me that first?” Alina asked curiously as they walked out of the stables into the early day sun. The day was promising to be wonderful, unblemished by clouds and perfectly warm; and if there weren't so many things to do, she would ask Aleksander to just go somewhere - anywhere - just to spend the day with him. However his obligations awaited him, and she had her own work, and the time they had for themselves was precious and short.

“Well, this.... might require more time,” he told her as they walked back.

“You're so mysterious,” she said. “It's not something bad?”

He paused. “Bad? Oh no. Not at all. But it might be unexpected,” he told her and then they hurried through the Little Palace as much as her condition allowed. He closed the door once they were in his rooms, a definite sign that he did not want them to be disturbed, and then gently took her hand. There was an odd expression on his face, not quite excitement in the way he looked at her that she had to wonder what on earth he was going to give her. “Come with me,” he said, slowly letting out a breath.

He was nervous.

“Sasha? What is it?” she asked as he led her to his map and the mess of documents spread on the big table. He pulled her to stand above his great map.

“We were here,” he said, pointing at an area near the Shu Han border, not too far from the Fold. “And there's a small city here,” he pointed at a spot on the map, marked with a miniature tower. “It's called Dva Stolba.”

Alina nodded, watching him patiently, knowing that for some reason he needed to tell her this at his own pace.

“Have you ever been there?” he asked. Alina observed the map.

"No, but... Keramzin used to get supplies from there. I remember the crates, with the name written on it. Those... contained some horribly smelling soap, which was probably the cheapest, and that's why Ana Kuya ordered it... why you ask?"

He cleared his throat, shifting on his feet and observing her, looking almost as if he expected a reprimand.

"When we came here after... after we were married," he paused, the memory of it all still troubling him, "I desperately wanted to do something that would make you hate me a little less....," he sighed, and she did too. She did not hate him, she was afraid to trust him again, she was afraid to trust her heart, but she did not hate him. It needed to be said, again and again, until they could look at the past without seeing the scars first. But now, she felt she needed to let him tell his tale. "And there was a matter of our marriage certificate that had to be filled here, in Os Alta; because it couldn't be filled on the battlefield. And then I realized that I don't know the names of your parents, and that you probably don't know them either -"

Alina nodded. She didn't even know how old she was when they died, or how it happened or why. Nobody at Keramzin knew their names or knew anything about them, aside from the last name which, she supposed, was her father's - Starkov. She supposed she remembered them, few fleeting images of their faces, of her mother braiding her hair, of feeling warm and safe; but there was nothing substantial. Nothing that didn't feel like a mere dream.

"So I decided I'd find out. Well, at least I'd try, because I didn't want to...," he took a breath as she watched him. "I don't know my father's name. My mother never told me. I'm fairly sure she knows it but she deems him... *undeserving to be known*. She doesn't think that I should know. And I thought -," he paused, nervously searching her face. "I hope, my love, you don't feel about this like you felt about the books. Weeks ago I got a word - our military operations were finished and my scout returned with news -"

When he paused this time, Alina had realized that she was barely breathing and that her eyes were prickling. She had an inkling - no, she knew, she knew what he was doing. He took one parchment from the table - neatly rolled, crispy white, looking brand new - and started to unfold the document for her to see.

"I had all the towns around Keramzin searched - the birth record registries in the parishes and churches.... and then, I got the news. There was a birth record for Alina Starkov in a small church in Dva Stolba. I went there to see for myself and - I dare say that this, this could indeed be ...-" he didn't finish, but she knew what he meant. She took the document from his hands - he obviously had it copied - and she looked over it, the immaculate, fine handwriting of the person who transcribed it; the dates, the names, oh Saints *the names*; as her vision blurred. - "The year," he paused, now looking excited, "The year fits, I think, because this would make you... twenty two years old now. There is your name and judging by your parent's names, your father was Ravkan and your mother was Shu. And... it seems you were born in late summer, which... which somehow feels right. The priest I talked to, an old man, told me that they probably lived in one of the villages nearby. So I went looking -"

Alina held her breath. Her cheeks were streaked with warm tears.

"And I did find a place. I went looking for - for your father, actually," he looked down, placing his hand on the document he brought, next to a name. Alina wiped her eyes and curled her fingers around his bicep, standing close to him.

"Mikhail Starkov," she read. "And Lai. Lai Starkova. Oh *Saints* -"

The names .

"I asked about him, figuring it was less likely to hear all sorts of false information about where Sankta Alina was born. In a small village just south of Dva Stolba, there are still people who remember him... his wife... their daughter. They told me you weren't older than four when they decided to leave for West Ravka. Your father was a carpenter, and he wanted more work than he could find in the place where you lived. He wanted a better life for you all -"

Alina drew close to Aleksander, closing her eyes. "That's why they wanted to cross the Fold" she said. He kissed her forehead lightly, to soothe and to apologize, for he created the darkness that took her family. And yet she couldn't hate him. She couldn't even blame him, knowing everything she knew now.

"I found your home, Alina," he whispered. "I found the place where you were born. A small house - empty now... the windows are broken, most of the furniture gone, but... I have found this," he said, reaching into the inner pocket of his kefta for something small, wrapped in a brown paper, the kind the military used to wrap supplies with. Alina took the packaging from him, pulling apart from him only enough to unwrap what he had given her - a silver hairpin, she realized, light and finely made.

"It's Shu," Alina said. "It's...," she stared at the tiny piece of silver on her palm, long and elegant, trying to recall the warm smile and the long black hair. Her mother, pinning up her hair. Would she use something like this - did she use this precise pin to do so? She tried to call the image back to herself, pulled at it like she pulled at her light, but it evaded her, remaining nothing more than a mist of the past in her mind.

"It's too much to be just a coincidence," Aleksander said.

"Was there anything else?" Alina asked, her heart staring to beat hard, but he shook his head.

"No my love," he told her, pulling her close and stroking her face, her hair. "I am sorry, so sorry. I have searched the entire house. I found the hairpin on the floor, next to the bed - I am guessing whatever you parents had left behind - someone had taken it long before I set my foot inside. But, there was a bed in one room, and next to it a small cot. A mirror on the wall. I imagine it must have been a lovely home," he said. Alina looked at the hair pin, tears spilling freely from her eyes. For years - her entire life, what she remembered of it - she had nothing, and nobody. No past, no parents, except the story of how they died. No names, nothing that was theirs, nothing to prove that she didn't just fall to this earth, discarded and unwanted. She looked at the hairpin, a delicate, beautiful thing, so ordinary and yet, the most precious gift anyone had ever given her. "May I?" Aleksander asked. She looked up at his face and then his open palm, letting him have the pin - then he gently turned her around so he could reach her neatly done hair, placing the hairpin just above her bun, where it could be seen against her shiny black hair.

She turned to him then. "There are...no words - no words -"

He shushed her gently and kissed the top of her head. "I may have been selfish at first, thinking how to get back to your good graces... how to show you that I was sorry... but then, later, I realized that I could give you something important. And the more I looked, the more I thought about what you would say, and what it would mean to you. It- it wasn't about me any more."

Alina shook her head, looking at the table, at the document sitting there. A proof of her existence, a proof that she was loved and wanted. That she was *somebody*, instead of an orphan; that she had a mother and a father instead of blank space in the orphanage's registry book. She leaned against Aleksander, her forehead against his chest, unable to think much, overwhelmed by what he had just done for her. He held her until she calmed down, her cheek against the vibrations of his beating heart.

"I see now why you wanted to show me the horse first," she said. She felt his quiet laugh more than she could hear it, a lovely, soft rumble under her cheek. Alina looked up at him. "I have a birthday," she said.

"You do, indeed," he told her. "And it's in just a couple of months. And I think," he paused to study her, his smile beautifully content, "A proper celebration is due. Would you like that, *dušo moja*?"

She nodded, content to hug him around the waist and bury her face into his chest again.

*

"The house will be renovated," he told her as he helped her step out of the carriage. "It is, after all, the birthplace of Sankta Alina," he said, a curious glint in his eye.

There was commotion in the refugee village, as the new houses were still being built. To the best of Alina's knowledge the new group was supposed to arrive tomorrow, or a day after that, and she felt relief now that Aleksander was here. People gathered to greet them, seeing now that the Black General was back, and it seemed that the most welcomed him cordially, some asking questions, others offering their help. Aleksander took time to answer them all, while Ivan and Fedyor stood close by, ready to react upon any sight of trouble.

Alina found she enjoyed watching him have these conversations, about matters big and small, suggesting solutions, delegating tasks to Ivan, or consulting with her on various matters. He promised to help and she could see that the people trusted him, leaving them more content or at least relieved; trusting that the general would not forget. Alina knew that a list of tasks had to be made soon, in order for everyone's requests to be filled, and Aleksander sent Ivan to write them down - and that was when Alina saw Mal.

He was standing not too far away, talking to Dimitry and a couple of more men when he spotted her. The judgement and any other reaction he might have shown was quickly pushed behind a facade as he focused on Aleksander. Alina realized then that Mal would put Aleksander in danger without much hesitation - which meant he would endanger himself in a heartbeat.

The moment she tensed, Aleksander felt it. Her power shifted within her, pulling at his shadows, and instantaneously he found out what was wrong.

He looked at her - she could sense the protective clouding of his shadows, and yet he did not move a muscle, appearing calm on the outside.

"We can go, if you'd like that," he told her. There was no pressure behind his words, and when she weighed them, she found that a part of her did want to leave this situation.

Other part of her needed something else.

"No," she told him, thinking how she had no reason to run away. To hide. She would just prove Mal right then, wouldn't she? "I'm not going to act as if I've done something wrong," she said - especially after she saved Mal's life. "I want to talk to him."

Aleksander nodded. "I understand. But under no circumstances I'd allow for him to upset you -"

"I don't want to allow it either," Alina replied. "I'll take Fedyor with me. I can always leave. But I need to speak my mind. Or at least try -" she said.

Aleksander nodded, his mouth set in a tight line - despite his stoic demeanor, despite him respecting the boundaries she was setting, she knew that he couldn't feel comfortable about this. Alina touched his hand, letting her light flow to Aleksander like a gentle breeze.

"Thank you, my love," she said, quiet so that only he could hear. With that she turned around and looked at Fedyor who followed her instantly.

Alina started walking towards Mal, realizing then that he did not expect her to do so. If anything he looked now like he wanted to leave while she took measured steps, her spine straight and her face serious. When she approached she greeted Dimitri and other men and then looked at Mal. His face seemed familiar and at the same time not, and Alina realized that he looked tired, thinner, that he was probably overworked. She had no idea what were the conditions of his service after he was released, but at this point she decided not to let it all distract her. She could inquire later; right now she knew what she needed to set straight.

"Dimitri," Alina spoke. "I require a place to have a conversation with mister Orestev here. See, he is my life long friend -"

Predictably, Mal's face twitched at this, while Dimitri offered them to use his house, not too far from where they were standing. She looked at Mal, unflinching. "Do you agree?"

It took him a long moment to respond. "Yes," he said. Alina nodded and looked at Fedyor. "Will you accompany us?"

"Will he listen to what we're saying again?" Mal asked, seemingly unable to contain himself.

"He is coming with me, as he is my personal guard," Alina told him. Mal did not protest after that, but Alina didn't miss the ugly look he shot at Fedyor.

Dimitri led them to his home and showed them inside, leaving them then, while Fedyor remained at the door. "If you need me, call me," he said to Alina, fixing Mal with a stare. Alina sighed.

She was alone with Mal then - well, relatively alone. Fedyor was just there, and she had no doubt that if she ever called for help Aleksander would materialize out of nowhere in an instant. And that, that wasn't a bad thought at all.

"There are a few things I need to tell you," Alina started calmly.

"Oh yes? Which ones are that? After not bothering to contact me -"

"Stop," Alina said. "Stop that, at once. I did not contact you, that's true. I didn't do it because I didn't care."

"Then why, Alina? Can you imagine what it was like for me? I was locked up and then exchanged for their own prisoner, and after that the first thing I learned was that you were gone! Taken by that monster -"

"He is not a monster!" Alina said, before she could stop herself. Anger flared in Mal's eyes. "No, stop. I mean it. I am not here to listen what you think of him -"

"You certainly didn't have any problem before they caught us, didn't you?"

Alina felt her eyes fill with tears at his mention of that. She did remember - she remembered most of it as they were making their way through west Ravka and hiding. She was convinced that Aleksander was dead. She talked about how terrible he was just to stop herself from thinking how absolutely unbearable it was, that he did not exist any more.

"He is not a monster," she repeated.

"What changed your mind? The comfortable life inside the Palace? The sweet talk? I didn't know you were that naive -"

"Mal stop. Stop hurting me -"

He gave her an incredulous smile. "I am hurting you? *Me* ? Did you forget how he stuck those antlers into you?"

"And I have forgiven him! Can we be done with that? I know why he had done it, and yes it was wrong, and it's still within my right to forgive it if I please - stop staring at me like that, Mal! I am not stupid and I am not naive, and I am most certainly not his prisoner -"

"What do you want, Alina? Saints, I don't even recognize you like this -"

Alina took a sharp breath at his words. "I don't recognize you either, Mal. I have known you all my life, and you were never intentionally cruel to me. I did not abandon you. I was imprisoned, in the dark, I was tied to a wall and half starved. And then one day that captain appeared and told me that I had a choice. A peace treaty marriage or your death. And even without that... how much choice do you think I had in that situation?"

"They treated you like a thing, both of them -"

"Oh, the West Ravkans surely did. But once it was done? Once I was married to a monster as you say? The monster made sure that I was safe. That I recovered. That you were freed and back to your unit!"

"He bought you with kindness, then?"

"No more than I bought him with my pretty eyes," Alina took an exasperated sigh. "He did not have to, Mal. I love him. I'm sorry I did not tell you before. It was too personal and in the circumstances we were in... ultimately it didn't matter."

Mal stared at her, seemingly losing the steam to keep fighting. His eyes still looked at her sharply, incredulously. "The important thing is, if I had stayed with you? I would have died."

"*What*?"

"My powers, Mal. The Grisha waste away and die if they're prevented from using their powers. You know the stories just as I do. *Look for the weak ones*, remember? People desperate to be safe, so they'd push their powers down, and it would eventually kill them. One way or another."

That did numb his anger. Alina could see it, in the lines of his face and the set of his shoulders - no matter how much his pride was hurt, he did not truly want any harm to come to her.

"Look at our world, Mal. Look at least what's happening *here*. Tomorrow there will be another hundred people here, looking for a shelter. Nobody is safe, the Grisha least of all - except in one place."

"The Second Army," Mal said.

"The Little Palace," Alina added. "Do you know that I had to take a child from this village because her family did not want her? Because she is Grisha? That other child here was stoned, along with his mother - because he is Grisha? There is just one place where things like that don't

happen. And it may look comfortable on the outside... but think of the price, Mal. Not a single Grisha can *not* serve in the Second Army. That is what the Tsar expects. The only choice there is... is a life of persecution and danger."

She spoke, seeing Mal's expression change - she could see him reaching conclusions, she could see him relaxing further, and then suddenly his eyes turned sharp again.

"But Alina," he said, and for a change he sounded concerned. "Your child too will be a Grisha. Wouldn't it?"

Last time she declared this topic was off limits; but Alina could see now what he was saying.

"Yes," she said quietly, briefly looking down at the folds of her dress. She looked up at him.

"I somehow don't see you agreeing with that, do you? Letting your child serve the Second Army?"

"Would you let a child of your own to war, Mal?"

"No. If I could help it," he said.

If I could help it, Alina thought. Few little words that made all the difference. Few impossible words.

"And can you imagine how many children... which Aleksander *watched grow up*, children he took into safety, he had sent to war? He *had to*? To their deaths? Can you? Can you imagine at what personal cost decisions like that come?"

"Okay. Okay, Alina," Mal shifted in his seat, pulled his chair closer, he leaned forward. With each minute he was looking more like her friend and less like that angry, accusing person she could not recognize. "I can see what you're saying. I don't like him, but I see the point you're making."

"Good," she said, sighing in relief. They looked at each other for a little while, and then he shook his head. "Saints, Alina. I wish you just wrote me something -"

"This time, I really *am* to blame," she said. He cracked a smile. "In my defense I was preoccupied -" she started and he arched a brow, something he would do when he teased her. "Oh, *stop*. Do you think I was delighted at first? I was terrified. I was told, before I left the Little Palace with you, that I'd simply be a prisoner. It took some time until I realized that things I was told were not the truth."

Mal sighed. "Okay. Okay. What now?"

Alina rubbed her face. She couldn't tell him about all the things that were happening, all the possible dangers looming around Aleksander and herself - but she could direct him to focus on here - and - now. "I wish I knew. The... this is the only safe place for me right now," she said. "Can you understand that?"

Mal looked at her seriously, solemnly, and then finally nodded. "I may not like it..."

"And for the time being, there isn't anything that's better. I can't switch off my powers. I can't pretend I am not what I am. A Grisha, a Sun Summoner. And you know as well as I do that being one means certain things."

"And it's a horrible burden, Alina. It's unfair," he said, not unkindly, but still probably looking at it all from his own point of view.

"None of this is fair," she told him. "The war, the monarchy, the Tsar who doesn't really care about anyone's life, just his own comfort. I'm sorry if I can't be fair either," she told him.

Mal gave her another long look before he nodded, seemingly resigned. "I can see that you have made your choice," he said.

"I did," she told him. "All I ask is for you to respect that. You don't have to like Aleksander, or approve of him at all -"

"I care that you're safe," Mal said. "And if I can't keep you safe... which I couldn't -"

"I am safe here," she said. "Just as I've told you."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes, Alina. *Saints*. I could be angry with you, or frustrated with you, but I cannot hate you. Did you really think -?"

"Well, *you hurt me pretty badly*, Mal," she said, still feeling the sting of his earlier words.

"I'm sorry," he said, and perhaps he was more sorry for things turning out the way they did, than about hurting her, but for the time being? She was fine.

"I forgive you," she said then.

"Thank you, Alina," he said.

"Just... don't try anything stupid, okay? I don't intend to marry again to save your ass," she said. Mal laughed and she laughed too - and for the time being, she was assured that he would respect everything she had asked of him.

Chapter End Notes

* the beginning of this chapter was, yet again, self indulgence on my part. Aleksander finding Alina's birth records was one of the first ideas I had for this story, and when I started working on it, back in July, I knew he would find it at some point. The sense of belonging and knowing one's identity - and knowing who your parents were, at least, is part of that identity - is something that I find very important for Alina, and for her journey. The hairpin bit was inspired by the moodboard that I use on tumblr for this fic, made by jomiddlemarch. :) Check it out there - the hairpin in question is in the upper right corner of the moodboard. I thought it would be lovely for Alina to have something tangible that would connect her to her past, and to her mother, especially now.

* as for the conversation between Alina and Mal, I felt it was important for Alina to get a closure there on her own terms. In my opinion the way she dealt with Baghra wouldn't work, simply because her relationship with Mal was longer, closer and much different. I wanted her to be free to tell him that he wronged her and that it wasn't okay; and to have an actual chance to communicate.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Find me on tumblr @ vesperass-anuna

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone - I feel like I haven't been updating in ages. here is the new chapter with the long awaited court intrigue, as the plot thickens. I would say that we're now in the last third of this fic. If you're still reading this, I give you my heartfelt thank you. I hope you'll enjoy this new chapter, and if you do, please be so kind and leave a comment <3

Alina turned for the umpteenth time, the sleep stubbornly refusing to come to her. She tried to be quiet, she really did, but Aleksnader had somewhat of a sixth sense when it came to her.

"Milaya?" he whispered a moment later. She sighed. She didn't want to wake him, considering how long and rough the following day might prove to be. "What's wrong, my sweet?"

"Can't sleep," she said.

"Are you in pain? Uncomfortable?" she could feel him move and he turned on the bedside lamp to see her. She smiled.

"No... I'm tired but I can't fall asleep," she said. "It's very annoying."

His slight frown was bordering amused, had his eyes not been so worried.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, and she had to bite her lip, because yes - there was one thing she needed. Well, one thing she kept thinking about. Since the dinner.

But it was stupid. And they were already in bed. And the entire palace was asleep already.

"Alina? What is it?" Aleksander asked, and his tone convinced her to tell him. She shifted and pulled herself up, her rounding stomach preventing her from pulling up her legs and hugging her knees. She looked at it feeling exasperated.

"The cake," she said in a small voice.

"The cake?" he repeated, searching her face.

"It's... ugh, it's stupid and I shouldn't ... bother you with this. The honey cake, one that was served at the dinner? I didn't eat any, I couldn't then, and then later I wanted to, but I've already had my bath, and you were reading the reports and then we went to sleep -"

He smiled. It was warm and fond and perhaps a bit more amused than she preferred, because this was absolutely annoying and the worst thing was, she couldn't help herself at all, so he had no business being amused -

"But that's easily fixed, my love. I'll go to the kitchens and bring you some cake," he said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. Irrationally, she felt she might cry.

"But what -," she paused, realizing that her voice was actually trembling. A bit over a year ago she didn't even think about cakes. There was no room for self indulgence when it came to food, and sometimes there was barely enough food for her to feel full. Fruit was something she saw only in passing, she ate it rarely - she lived off broths and dried salted meat and as much bread she could get a hold of. And now? She was getting *so spoiled*. "What if it's all gone by now? You'd be going for nothing."

"Hey," he said, his smile turning so wonderfully soft, that it almost managed to extinguish the sudden guilt she felt. "It definitely wouldn't be for nothing, besides... This is a big palace. The honey cake is very popular. The kitchens always make a big amount, when they *do* make them."

(That was kind of the truth, and if Alina was honest, the cake was on the menu... rather often.)

He kissed her and got out of bed before she could give any further protests, and then she was left to wait. Giving up the pretense that she could sleep any time soon, at least until Aleksander returned, Alina arranged the pillows behind her, deciding to enjoy their comfort. She arranged her legs into a semi lifted position and pulled the cover over her stomach, letting her eyes wander over familiar shapes and shadows inside the room. Her eyes were starting to drop when Aleksander returned, carrying a big tray. She pushed herself up to sit, thinking how this was going to become more difficult as the time progressed - but right now she could still do it with relative ease.

There were two plates of cake - with two big slices each - and two cups of tea. Perhaps she should have told him that he didn't have to even make tea for her *now*, but she gave up on that before even opening her mouth. He brought her the cake. The cake she spent *hours* thinking about.

"Are you going to look at it now, when it's here?" he asked, sitting next to her and placing the tray over her lap. She sighed. It all looked wonderful. Aleksander was sitting next to her, his dark robe loosely tied around him and his eyes wonderfully warm and endlessly amused. "You could have just asked earlier, you know."

"I didn't want to bother you with silly cravings," she said.

"It truly does not matter how silly it may seem. I will happily bring you anything within my power, that could bring you comfort," he said. Alina stared at his grin and his lovestruck gaze. It felt almost unreal, almost as something that possibly could not be true.

"No," she took the fork, as if deciding on a lot more things than a simple cake; she took one piece of the long desired sweet and brought it to her mouth. It was perfect. It was *just what she was wishing for* all day long. "Oh, Aleksander. Is there a saint of cakes?"

He laughed. long, heartfelt, wonderful laugh. She took another bit of cake and offered it to him. "I don't think there is, milaya," he said after he swallowed.

"Well, then, *you* should be one," she told him, making him laugh even more; she even toyed with the idea as she fed him honey cake and ate it herself: it was a wonderful thought. "Sankt Sasha of The Cakes. I think it's so wonderfully suited."

*

She seemed to wake too soon to her liking. Protesting against gentle nudging, Alina realized that the dawn light was barely coming through the windows and that Aleksander was calling her name.

He surely didn't get up so early without a good reason.

"Sasha?" she called, too sleepy, too content under the covers. His hand brushed her cheek and she sensed the fabric of his kefta on her skin.

"Have to go, my sweet," he told her softly. That made her open her eyes.

"Why?" she was turning around and sitting up - he was completely put together and ready to go.

"The people have arrived, my love," he told her.

"The - ? Oh. The refugees?" She was removing the covers from her legs, even though she was still bleary eyed. Aleksander's hands caught hers.

"Yes - you stay here, love, please," he looked towards the window and then back at her. "Take your time, have your breakfast. You can come later if you wish, and even if you don't, nobody would begrudge you," he said, placing his hand on her stomach.

"Of course I will be there -"

"Alina, my sweet, but the afternoon," he started. She pulled closer to him, to press her face against his.

"I'm sure I can handle both. And then I promise I will spend tomorrow having naps and resting."

Aleksander smiled and kissed her, gathering her into a hug. It was too short for her liking but she understood his haste.

"Be careful," she told him, her fingers fixing his collar.

"Always," he said, and after one more kiss, he got up and left.

Alina sank back into the comfort of the bed, fully aware that there was no way she'd be able to fall asleep. She did as Aleksander had asked of her; she rested for a bit longer, stretching and turning in their bed until she was fully awake. Deciding she was fully rested she got up, pulling on her robe and quickly braiding her hair. She didn't expect to find Ivan or Fedyor in the kitchen when she went down to get her coffee - the tradition she insisted on despite Ivan's constant grumbling and remarks that he could bring it up stairs for her, surely she was supposed to spare her strength? - however Alina found Fedyor in the hallway, dressed and obviously expecting her.

"The General told me you wished to go to the village a bit later," he said. "As soon as you're ready, I can have a carriage prepared."

Alina thanked him and called for breakfast, getting dressed by herself, wanting to go after Aleksander as soon as possible. She knew he was perfectly capable of handling it all, but she felt responsible for the entire organization and everything that was done in preparation up until just two days ago. She felt she had to be there. She was combing her hair when Genya came, closing the door quietly and pausing before she went to Alina.

Alina stopped pulling the brush through her hair, fixing her eyes on Genya's reflection in the mirror, her cast down eyes, the way she held her hands, fingers of her right hand tightly wrapped around the left, as if she was trying to hold herself together.

"Genya? What happened?"

The uncharacteristic silence stretched as Genya remained rooted where she was, her eyes seemingly lost. Alina turned around but Genya did not move, looking like someone in a state of shock. Something definitely was not right, and Alina got up, reaching for Genya's hands when she came near. She almost expected Genya would flinch, but her strange trance continued beyond Alina's touch. Alina gently shook her shoulder and only then Genya looked at her, not through her.

"Genya?"

"They called me to the Palace," she said, her voice a bare whisper. "Ordered me to come and gather my things -"

"Wait... what?"

"I am being released from Tsaritsa's service," Genya explained. "In other words, I am being kicked out -"

"What... why?" Alina asked, confused. Only two days ago Tsaritsa requested Genya's help with her appearance, deeming it absolutely necessary - which it was, if one was to hide obvious signs of ageing. Tatiana Lantsov was vain, putting tantamount importance on the way her skin looked or how her breasts didn't sag; which was a carefully tailored illusion. Alina could not imagine any scenario in which Tatiana willingly gave up on the pretense she was putting forth, becoming the envy of all the court ladies who couldn't possibly match her because they didn't have a Tailor for a personal servant.

Genya took a deep breath to steady herself. Alina rose from her seat. Genya looked like a sandcastle that wanted to crumble, and when she came close Alina could see a myriad of emotion, but underneath them all, something surprising and sharp as a blade - frustration.

"I am not just a servant, Alina," she said quietly, so quietly, like she was afraid to summon something that lurked below the waters this entire time. Alina closed her eyes and sighed.

"I *know*," she whispered, taking Genya's hands into hers.

"Do you?" Genya's voice was barely audible.

"I know that the Tsar isn't simply telling things to my husband, Genya," Alina spoke seriously, letting her own mind fully grasp what she was avoiding to think about this entire time: Genya had been a spy. And that was certainly not all there was. Alina picked her next words carefully. "The Tsar didn't get sick all of the sudden either," she said.

Genya shook her head and started to cry - silent tears full of something deeper than anger, something scorching and poisonous; something that seemed to build and threatened to wreck her from within - and she was desperately trying not to let that happen.

"I am sorry," she whispered, "I am sorry, it is not your - your responsibility or burden -"

"Oh, nonsense," Alina said, pulling Genya into a hug, and for a moment the Tailor felt stiff, as if she wasn't letting herself deserve it. "Genya," Alina whispered, worried. Genya let herself hug Alina in return, letting out quiet little sobs, still holding tight onto something within herself. "We need to tell Aleksander," Alina said. "He surely won't blame you."

"I know," Genya said, "But it's not that. it's -"

"This has implications. I know," Alina told her. Genya nodded and they stayed like that for a while, Alina stroking Genya's long, flawless hair. Why did this happen now, she wondered. What did it mean for them all? Did that First Army commander have anything to do with it?

"I am *sorry*," Genya whispered then, gathering her composure and wiping her eyes. Despite the tears and reddened cheeks she still looked without a flaw, and the only indication that something was wrong was just a bit of redness around her eyes. As if there wasn't anything that could *possibly* touch her composure. As if there was anything worth allowing yourself to lose it.

"There is nothing to apologize for," Alina said, watching as her friend put herself back together within mere moments. If she didn't know, Alina wouldn't have guessed that Genya had cried. Oh the price she had to pay for being able to do this.

"I am supposed to help you get ready. Not to cry over something I... clearly have no control over."

"And again, I tell you... there is nothing to apologize for," Alina said. "Come, please, help me arrange my hair. The new refugees have arrived, and I need to go there. The royals can wait."

*

With her thoughts heavy Alina had left the Little Palace, and if Fedyor sensed any of it - which he probably did - he didn't mention it. Despite the nearing summer the day was windy and grey, heavy clouds weighing over them all. The carriage ride seemed to last forever, her anxiety building as she feared the sights of chaos and suffering - however when they did arrive, the commotion they encountered seemed busy, but organized.

Alina took the hand that Fedyor offered and stepped out, pulling her kefta tighter around herself, feeling out of her depth for a moment. There were so many people - frightened people, lost people; people who seemed hopeless and tired and at the absolute end of the line, but that was not all. There were members of both First and Second army at work - giving out blankets and food, gathering people, talking to them, there were healers helping and heartenders doing their best to soothe, and at the center of it all, she found Aleksander. He was giving orders, having conversations, directing, advising, even soothing - all while holding a child in his arms. A little girl, not much older than two years old, clinging tightly to his kefta. Alina went to him, needing to talk to him about all this, obviously, worried that her preparations weren't enough, but also needing to tell him what Genya just told her, and wanting to at least take the child off his arms, so he could work more freely, but before she approached him, someone else did. It was Mal, with a group of First Army soldiers, and the sight was certainly unreal - there was no hostility, no opposition in her Mal's gestures as he kept explaining something and Aleksander listened, all while minding the child he held in his arms.

How ridiculous it was to fight against one another, Alina thought, when the true plight was out there threatening them all.

She approached, deeming it unnecessary to wait any longer, for Aleksander certainly wouldn't want her to; not on his own account. All the men greeted her, as politely and formally as it should be, and she caught Mal saying that he would get something done; and before Aleksander dismissed them, Mal nodded at her cordially and hurried off.

"That was certainly nice to see," she said to Aleksander, as they now stood on their own, Fedyor not too far from them.

"I must commend your friend," Aleksander said. "He is hardworking and efficient."

"Oh Saints," Alina teased. "Are you two going to become friends?"

Aleksander smiled. "I am not sure if that is likely, but I have always tried to be a fair man and a commander."

"So you are. You do have a new friend here," Alina observed, her attention turned to the little girl who nestled against Aleksander's shoulder. "Who is this?"

"This is Mira, and she is tired, I'm afraid," Aleksander said. "She lost her parents on the move and currently we're looking for them. She does seem to like my kefta, though," he said, shifting the little girl's weight against him. She was obviously about to fall asleep, her tiny arm going around his neck as he smiled. All that child cared for was that she felt safe, and if anyone else was deeming the sight strange, nobody dared commenting.

"Would you like me to take her?" Alina offered.

"I am doubting she would agree to let go of me, but you can try," he said. Alina smiled and offered her arms to the little girl, and with some coaxing and tiny summoned suns Mira was passed between Aleksander's and Alina's arms, where she settled again. "That's good. But... *Saints* you do look wonderful with her," Aleksander said, allowing himself a tiny moment where he undoubtedly imagined that the child in her eyes was theirs.

"You're staring," she told him.

"I know. I will not, not any more. Work needs to be done."

"Yes. But I need to inform you of something, Aleksander," Alina said, thinking of Genya and the way the Tailor held herself, putting in all her effort not to fall apart. Alina wondered briefly what else was there that she was not directly aware of, deciding to push several doubts aside. His expression changed from fond to serious.

"This doesn't sound good," he said.

"It is not," Alina told him, holding his gaze.

*

Alina changed her clothes after the lunch, adhering to all the unwritten court rules for occasions such as these. her dress was a dark shade of blue, her hair done in a strict updo that left no doubts about her position or status; her jewelry unassuming yet fine - everything about her appearance spoke of deliberate care of how she would present herself, but not coming close to the grandeur of a Tsaritsa, not risking hurting her pride. Aleksander's kefta was formal and black, one of the simpler ones that he possessed, everything about him speaking of the competent general who successfully handled the war front.

"Let me speak, unless directly spoken to," he was whispering to her as they walked towards the Grand Palace. His fingers folded between hers and he squeezed her hand, giving or seeking assurance, she wasn't certain. "We act as if nothing of significance has occurred. It is well within the right of the royal family to end Genya's service at the Palace, although we know it's not a coincidence..."

"It hardly is," Alina sighed. "That commander has to suspect something -"

"General Vorkoff," Aleksander said. "Always had ambitions, striving to replace Zlatan. Which is what ultimately happened. Although I am not certain he isn't loyal to Zlatan."

"How many of them are there? The ones loyal to Zlatan?" Alina asked. They were approaching the Palace grounds - the building that seemed grand and marvelous once loomed now above them like a constant threat in their backyard.

"It is hard to say, milaya. It is not a majority, I think, but the group is certainly well connected... and they're planning something. It would help if we knew where Zlatan was."

"What are they planning?"

Aleksander paused briefly. "For starters, to get rid of me," he said. Feeling the dread fill her bones, Alina held his hand a little tighter. "They won't. Don't worry milaya. All these decades, centuries.... I am where I am because I haven't been defeated. And I will not let any harm come to any of us," he said, briefly lifting her hand to his mouth and kissing her knuckles.

"I believe you," she told him, holding his gaze for a moment; and after that they resumed their walk towards the Grand Palace.

Aleksander had requested a private audience, and yet they were instructed to go to the throne room upon their arrival. They were left to wait, which was expected and served merely as a show of power, just as the decision to receive them in the grandest room of the palace was a decision made to put Aleksander in his place. A servant, far below the Tsar.

The minutes dragged, slow and heavy as they stood in the hallway, near the entrance to the throne room. Aleksander paced, ignoring the paintings and portraits judiciously observing from their spots high on the palace walls as the time seemed to distort. Alina's feet were hurting but she was adamant not to let it show, for Aleksander had enough worries as it were. She would get rest after this was over. She walked to him, taking his

hands in hers, feeling the edges of fear for the first time in a very long time. He squeezed her hands gently, his thumbs rubbing along her skin as he held her. He did not speak then, but he did not need to.

They were called inside not long after, and taking one long breath Alina followed her husband through the massive door, into the throne room and down the wide staircase, to finally stand in front of the Tsar.

As expected the royal family was there - the Tsar, Tsaritsa, Tsarevich Vasily, and the Apparatus - but next to the religious leader there was another person. A man in a First Army uniform, his insignia indicating the rank of a General - he seemed somewhat older than Aleksander, at least in appearance, his posture stern and stiff and his face detached.

Aleksander greeted the Tsar properly, and they both bowed, Alina holding onto Aleksander's hand just in case, for she was not as gracious as she used to be without the swell of her stomach in front of her. The dress that she was wearing concealed it for the most part, but she knew that all people present were fully aware of her condition. The Tsar did not seem obviously ill - however Alina had seen him in person only a couple of times and she was not the best judge of his condition. He was as fat as always, his fine clothes stretched ridiculously over the size of his body. The Tsaritsa's posture was entirely stiff as she observed every line and detail on Alina's person, undoubtedly looking for the signs of pregnancy they have come here to announce.

"Kirigan," the Tsar spoke. "What is this important news that you wished to inform me of?"

Aleksander spoke with practiced calm - they were overjoyed to announce they would soon welcome their first child to the world - and despite all the detached words and courtly manner, the warmth of Aleksander's hand helped make the entire feat bearable. The Tsaritsa graced Alina with several questions, to which Alina answered with short politeness, always casting her eyes down as she finished, keeping her hand on her stomach the entire time, feeling even more exposed than she did on the battlefield between East and West, when her captors brought her to Aleksander to be wed. She kept her eyes down aware of the eyes set upon her - the Tsars, Tsaritsa's, the Apparatus as he spoke of religious importance of these joyous news and how the people would rejoice upon the birth of Sun Summoner's child.

"The family of Summoners is indeed the most wonderful sign to the whole land, is it not? It is such a lucky thing, then, that the General safely returned from the front" Vorkoff said. His words were intended for Aleksander but he was looking at Alina. She could feel her husband's reaction, nothing that a bare eye could see; but she could sense it; the shadows within him rising, impenetrable darkness gathering for he knew a threat when he heard one.

"Sankta Alina must be protected, for her safety and prosperity is a message of hope to all," the Apparatus said. Alina was not an expert in politics but she could see the signs - Vorkoff occupied the spot near the Tsar, previously held by the Apparatus who now stood near Tsaritsa on the other side of the throne.

"It is my solemn duty to ensure Sankta Alina's safety," Aleksander said, looking at the Tsar but his words aimed elsewhere.

"You are, most certainly doing a great job at that, General," Vorkoff said, suddenly descending the stairs from the throne and towards two of them - something that had to be a breach of protocol, but nobody reacted in any way. Alina tensed but something in Aleksander shifted - something sharp, coming to the surface as he held her hand to assure her that they would be okay. "I am however worried, if you are mellowed by your personal happiness to blatantly disregard the state of this war."

As he approached Vorkoff had to look up at Aleksander - rarely anyone was quite as tall as him - and his accusation was met with icy calm and a raised eyebrow.

"What are you accusing me of, General?" Aleksander asked, his tone falsely calm.

Alina noticed how Vorkoff stood closer to her, so that she was almost between two men - a deliberate choice, she knew, for she and Aleksander could not change positions without breaching the protocol of the court.

"I must admit that I am dismayed by your neglectful treatment of the Monseno region," Vorkoff spoke. Just as expected, Alina thought. "All those attacks happening and you, General, are doing - what?"

"What would you have me do, General Vorkoff? You, perhaps, have some new information at your disposal? Do you perhaps know who is behind those attacks, where the enemy is situated? If that is so, then I must insist that you share them."

The silence followed, a hard line drawn by Aleksander's words, as Vorkoff's face darkened. Alina could almost feel the shift inside the room.

"Yet the attacks continue," Vorkoff didn't seem to give up. "And yet, you do not do anything."

"The matter is being investigated," Aleksander said, and technically that was not wrong.

"By whom? You do not have any troops on the ground, General," Vorkoff said. "Or spies," he added, and if the room went icy cold, if the shadows in the corners thickened, nobody seemed to notice. Vorkoff least of all.

"The Tsar has been informed about all of my findings in a timely fashion. I appreciate your suggestion, Vorkoff -"

"Since it's a good suggestion, Kirigan, I expect you to do something about it," the Tsar spoke. Alina could feel the shift in Aleksander's power, knowing that this was not what he had wanted.

"I am certain, moi Tsar, that the First Army regiment already stationed there could use some help with this task, seeing how they could not handle it by themselves so far," Aleksander said, his voice impeccably polite.

Alina thought that, if looks could kill, Vorkoff would probably annihilate Aleksander on the spot.

“With that I must agree,” the Tsar said, squinting at two military commanders and their thinly veiled hostility. “I expect results.”

“You know my stance, moi Tsar,” Vorkoff said. “All I see here is unnecessary stalling -”

“I know your stance as well, Vorkoff,” Aleksander said, taking a step forward breaching the protocol at last. “But I will not destroy a holy place based on suspicions and whims. I insist upon evidence.”

“The people will die. Ravkan people, ordinary people, and not your -”

Not your Grisha, Alina thought.

“And if we destroy the monastery, as you suggest, people will die with it as well. Ravkan people, Vorkoff. And I need to remind you - *we are all Ravkan*,” Aleksander breathed, his voice dangerously quiet.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Hello all! this chapter was stubbornly refusing to be written, resisting me with all its might; I was interrupted about three thousand times as I wrote, and I'm not sure how I feel about what came out of it. But it's a stepping stone in our story, and hopefully I managed to make sense instead of screwing it up.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Chaos always happens when there's already chaos," Fedyor observed, carefully closing the door after Genya and David walked in. At the same time Alina pulled the curtains closed, per Aleksander's instructions.

"You think someone inside the Little Palace would tell the Tsar or Vorkoff that we have all met?"

Aleksander, Ivan, Fedyor, David and Genya all stood around the War table.

"It's to be expected," Aleksander said practically. "At this point all of us are just playing one big game of pretend." Alina sighed, putting her hands on the swell of her stomach - she could see that Aleksander had noticed, but the situation did not allow for displays of comfort or affection. They had to discuss their options.

"What is the point of it all, then?" Alina asked. "If we know that they're planning to strike against us, and they know we're planning moves of our own -"

"They still don't know *what* our moves would be," Aleksander said. "They will be waiting for a mistake to be exploited, and so will we."

"It's a matter of not making that mistake, at all," Ivan said, stern faced. Alina wondered how possible that was. Aleksander moved several figurines of soldiers around, staring at the table.

"Vorkoff made sure to make our maneuvering room smaller. He's forcing me to send troops to Monseno, and open myself up to potential mistakes elsewhere. We need to learn what is going on over there and we need to learn it quickly. Which is why he mentioned spies..."

"He might know most of our spies. Or he's bluffing," Genya said. "Which is why he had me removed -"

"You did not make any mistakes, Miss Safin. You did not compromise yourself, not once in your long years of service, not even when -," Aleksander paused and Genya looked at her hands. "He made an educated guess."

"And yet," Genya said. "Are you confident to send your usual spies to Monseno, my sovereignty?"

Aleksander just sighed; feeling backed in a corner - he had to, Alina thought, wondering how much he had to hate it; how frustrating it had to be.

"A creative solution is required, then," David spoke, and everyone turned to him.

"Such as?" Ivan prodded, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked grim, an expression that would deter most people from commenting. David continued thinking aloud.

"Spies he isn't familiar with, of course," David said.

"Easier said than done," Ivan said. "It's not like we have an overabundance of spies around here -"

"Perhaps we don't need an actual spy, but rather someone unlikely. Someone who isn't expected to fill such a role -" David continued. Ivan's frown deepened. Alina observed them as they discussed the idea back and forth, Genya's dark expression and the way Aleksander rubbed his face. A thought nagged at the back of her mind, a promise given to her an eternity ago. *You will always have my hand*. Alina thought of it, turning the words over in her mind, remembering the frail looking girl with shiny eyes who gave it to her.

"Well, maybe there is such a person," she said. Everyone looked at her, with various degrees of surprise on their faces. "Several such persons, to be exact."

"Alina?" Aleksander said, and the way he said it was a full question, his eyes asking for an explanation.

"When I first came here, you told me Little Palace was the safest building in all of Ravka. And yet several people managed to sneak inside," she said. If the situation hadn't been so grim, Aleksander's reaction would have bordered on comical.

"My dearest," he paused. "Please tell me you are joking?"

"Do I look like I am joking, my love?"

"No. Absolutely not -" he started, ready to give her an impressive list of his objections and she could not fault him. She remembered well everything what had happened.

"Who is she talking about?" Ivan asked.

"The people who came here to kidnap me, Ivan," Alina explained. Aleksander was about to start speaking but she placed her hand on his, softly, because she didn't want to agitate him. "Please let me share my reasoning with you all. Then you can make a better judgment," Alina said.

"Bold choice," Genya said, looking around the room. "Fedya, I think we might need some alcohol."

"Coming right up," Fedya said, starting toward the door.

"Don't bother going to the kitchens," Aleksander said. "Oleg is hiding his best bottles, and my own collection is infinitely superior. I will just -" he gestured towards the door to his study and returned with a bottle of amber liquid several moments later. Genya found the glasses. Alina declined it, unsure how the drink would agree with her pregnant body. Aleksander called for a servant, walking to the door and asking for a pot of tea and plate of pastries. With drinks poured and tea about to arrive, everyone seemed more or less ready to hear what Alina had to say.

"There are three of them," Alina started. "Kaz Brekker, he is their leader, I would say. He makes the decisions and others seem to follow. He is smart, the kind who measures which knife would cut him less, so he'd throw himself in front of that one. He values the money," she paused, observing Aleksander's face, knowing that he understood what she meant. Kaz was the one they needed to buy. "Inej, she is the conscience. She is the one who values principles, the heart -"

"I would remember," Aleksander remarked dryly, his half grin letting Alina know that he was jesting. "Go on, please."

"She believes in the Sun Summoner," Alina said.

"Aha," Aleksander said, sounding like everything was making more sense now. "This is what gave you the idea."

"Yes," Alina said. "They were sent to kidnap me and sell me. In the end, they chose not to. Kaz because I was able to pay, Inej because she accepted it would be wrong; and I was able to convince them that letting me go was... right. Inej promised me her hand."

"These people were going to harm you," Ivan objected. "How is it that you feel comfortable even thinking about hiring them?"

"Because they work for money," Alina answered. "Because they can be reasoned with, because I succeeded once already. The way I see it, they owe us," Alina said, looking at Aleksander.

"How so?" Aleksander asked - not that he couldn't connect it all by himself, but he wanted her to speak it all aloud, he wanted to hear it, and he wanted everyone else in the room to hear it. Before Alina could speak the tea arrived - Aleksander took it upon himself to take the tray at the door and bring it to the table. Alina continued to explain.

"They owe us," Alina repeated. "Inej promised me I would have her help if I ever needed it. Kaz broke into your Palace. I do believe you have an image to uphold - as the Black General and the leader of Grisha. This man somehow found a way here, the least he can do is return the debt created with this breach."

"And he can be bought," Aleksander added. "And reasoned with."

"I believe so" Alina said.

"The third person," Ivan said. "There is the third one."

"Jesper," Alina told him. "The sharpshooter," she explained. "He would follow his friends. The way I see it... I am the person who needs to call in a favor from Inej. While you need to do so with Kaz," Alina said, looking at Aleksander. "And Jesper would follow the other two."

Aleksander did not reply straight away, and the fact that he was quiet was more telling than any reasoning.

"How can we know these people can be trusted?" Fedya asked.

"We can't," Alina said. "Not beyond assurance of a pay, after a job is done. But isn't that the truth about any spy?"

"True," Fedya said. "The difference being, that other spies have proven their loyalty by already committing to tasks and delivering results. But the only true guarantee is the pay. they all work for money promised -"

"Which means they need to trust us as well. Kaz Brekker and his two friends do not have any more reason to trust us, than we have to trust them," Alina said. "Is that not true?"

"I do not like this," Aleksander said, looking at all of them.

"But I am right?" Alina insisted, knowing that she was pushing his limits, but knowing also that he could take it. "Does Vorkoff expect you to hire your former assailants?"

"You're not wrong," Aleksander replied, too stubborn to simply give in. She loved him for holding his ground and she loved him even more for not letting his stubbornness get ahead of seeing the reason; and he had every right to be mistrustful. "Yet I still don't like this."

"And I understand that. These people were hired by your enemies, *our* enemies. But, if they can walk into this Palace unnoticed, that says something about their competence and skill. And that's what we need right now, is that not true?"

"She is right," Ivan said. "As much as I hate the fact. Whatever Vorkoff is planning, it has to do with the Monseno monastery, and we need to find out what that is. We need to make a decision."

"But we don't have too many options," Genya offered. "Not doing anything could cost us, just like doing the wrong thing could cost us -"

"At some point I am certain this will end in blood," Ivan unfolded his arms and leaned forward, putting his palms on the table. His words left very little doubt over what he was implying, and even though he didn't put it into words, Alina knew what he had meant. In the end it would be either them, or General Vorkoff. The monarchs, she thought, had no chance of being spared. She didn't know how she felt about that. "The only question is, *when*, and who draws the blood first," Ivan added. Alina shuddered looking at the people present in the room. There was no easy way out - there hadn't been one for centuries, and nobody here talked about blood or killing carelessly.

"Let's make sure, then, that it's us making that choice," Aleksander said. "I don't want innocent blood spilled. It's not us willing to carelessly sacrifice the people around them -"

"That brings us to another topic," Genya said.

"Which is?" David asked.

"The public image of the Lantsovs and their new advisor," Genya answered. "We need to sway people on our side."

"General Vorkoff has a certain reputation," Ivan said. "I would start with him, and make sure that his reputation gets widely known. Whatever they're planning, we're going to be in a much worse position if they capitalize on the support of the people."

"What is his reputation?" Alina asked. She had only learned about rebellions in the past, and she knew that a mass of people, no matter how untrained or simply armed, was as dangerous as a real army.

"He is a long time proponent of lowering the drafting age," Fedyor said. "As early as thirteen for boys, and fourteen for girls. It's pointless and ruthless. And considering how the Tsar holds him in high regard of late -"

"It would mean many families losing children... losing hands that do the work on the fields and farms -" Alina mused aloud. Yes, for some children were nothing but mere helping hands, but for many, children were cherished and beloved; and no matter the reason, Alina could hardly imagine a parent who would agree lightly with a plan such as this. "Nobody would welcome this. Not the people in the country, working in the fields, not the merchants."

"Yes," Genya said. "It would be something that most common folk would be afraid of. It would be useful if they feared him more than they fear us."

"Inciting fear is easy," Ivan said. "It's the easiest thing, in fact. But it's not enough. We need an advantage."

"We do have something that General Vorkoff does not," Fedyor said.

"And that is?" Aleksander asked.

"But it's obvious, *moy soverenyi*," Fedyor smiled, nodding gently in Alina's direction. "The Sun Summoner. Sankta Alina -"

"A *happily married* Sankta Alina," Genya added. "Awaiting a child, no less. If we're already forced into the religious narrative, if Lady Kirigan has to play the role of a saint, then we should use it for our benefit instead of letting the Lantsovs profit from it."

Aleksander glanced at Alina, and then back at Fedyor and Genya who didn't budge when he crossed his arms and frowned. Alina could imagine how and why he would object to this; how he didn't want her treated as a symbol or a tool of gaining the favor of the people, but both Genya and Fedyor were right. As much as she couldn't think of herself as a saint, there were people out there to whom she symbolized something - a hope that even the longest night would give in to the dawn, the longest wait was bound to end, and with it, the wars as well. Here she was, in good health, married and happy and pregnant - everything that most people dreamed of and hoped for, if not for themselves, then perhaps for the children they were struggling to raise. And if their long awaited saint was among them, having all these things, if her husband whom she trusted and relied on was fighting for that; then those people would be more inclined to put their trust in him, instead of a man who was willing and ready to snatch their barely grown children away from them and put the rifles in their arms.

"They're making a valid point," Alina placed her hand on top of Aleksander's, softly, letting him know that even though the whole idea was not the most comfortable thing to think of, it wasn't offputting. "You yourself made me put my powers on display in front of court members, didn't you? You were making a point then," she said, watching as his reluctance kept melting away. "If the people pray to me - and they do," Alina paused, feeling the discomfort that the thought brought, the power and responsibility she held and rarely thought of, "they need to know, without a doubt, who meets Sankta Alina's approval."

Genya's expression suddenly turned amused, her eyes sparkling as she observed Alina's display of affection. "I may have an idea," she said.

"You do?" Aleksander asked. If he was out of his depth right now, surrounded by his people taking over the planning of his own actions, he was valiantly not showing it.

"People need to see the General with his wife, in public. Wearing her colors and giving her adoring looks, meeting her approval."

"That should start some interesting gossip," Ivan said. "Which, as we know, is inevitable -"

"And as such can be creatively used," Genya said. "Now, did you know, there is an opera performance in Os Alta in just two weeks?"

"I see what you're suggesting, Miss Safin," Aleksander said.

"Of course, she will need a new dress, for which she will need the finest fabric, and you will personally accompany her to pick it out," Genya said. "You will take a walk through the capital with her, buy her flowers, take her to try the ice cream -"

"Ice cream?" Alina asked, smiling at Aleksander. "Tell me, is that something sweet?"

"Sweet and cold," Alkesander indulged her with an explanation. "You might enjoy it."

"And the people will see you together," Genya continued. "Next time you visit Os Alta, you will order a handmade crib for your child. You will visit the farmer's market. Buy produce from the villagers who will then talk about it to their neighbors. They will tell stories of Sankta Alina's kindness and happiness and how the Black General acts around her."

"The Darkling, devoted to Sun Summoner," Aleksander said. "That might be a good start, especially considering the fact that Vorkoff is not a man who knows kindness. I very much doubt he will try to endear himself to ordinary people at all."

"Well, let's not waste any time. Tomorrow should be a nice day. Perfect for taking a walk through the city."

*

The discussion had been exhausting, and despite refreshments, Alina felt hungry. It was too late for lunch and she decided to go down to the kitchens, and enjoy whatever leftover food was there inside the simple, perpetually warm rooms. She was indeed satisfied with her discoveries - there was broth, cooked ham, freshly baked bread and those same pastries Aleksander had ordered to the War Room. After a meal and another cup of tea Alina felt pleasantly full and somewhat calmer, trying not to let the conversation play over and over in her head. Instead she decided to look for Aleksander, who said he had something to take care of.

Alina wondered how he handled that conversation, with practically all of them suggesting something he wasn't very prone to agreeing with. She used to imagine him as strict and unyielding, and then even as someone with dictatorial tendencies, back during those days when she was trying to convince herself that she hated him. He wasn't anything of the sort, but accepting all those suggestions must have placed him far outside what he considered a comfort zone.

She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to hear how he was feeling and what he was thinking; she wanted to hear his worries and share them. There were still many things about those couple of days that they have not discussed, including the people who were meant to be her captors and then turned into her allies. She couldn't find him, though - he wasn't in his study, nor in the common rooms, he wasn't in the palace yard or at the stables. She was out of ideas where to look for him, when she came across Nadenka, carrying a bundle of, what looked like, children sized coats. The woman greeted Alina, now looking considerably more cheerful and relaxed than she did when Alina first met her.

"Are you too going to the classrooms, Lady Kirigan?" she asked.

"I am actually looking for the General - what do you mean, me too?"

"Oh, the General is exactly there," Nadenka said, smiling. Alina smiled back in surprise.

"Is he attending classes?"

"Oh no," Nadenka shook her head slightly, her smile widening. She even looked around, almost as if whatever Aleksander was doing was some grand secret. "My lady, I would have never thought," she paused, "that an important man as the General would take the time and entertain the children. But that is exactly what he is doing as we speak," she said.

"He is *entertaining the children*?"

"Yes, indeed he is. You should go and see," Nadenka said. With a smile Alina greeted her and hurried off down a long hallway, towards what she called the children's wing of the Little Palace. She passed the nursery, resisting the temptation to go inside, because if she did, she knew she wouldn't leave for a foreseeable time, and Aleksander would, quite likely, end up looking for her. Upon reaching the classrooms she entered, quietly, going through two rooms, until she reached the third, the one intended for the smallest students.

She was glad for being quiet, for knowing how to be, for she definitely did not want to interrupt the scene unfolding in front of her eyes. Peeking through the half opened door, she saw Aleksander, sitting on a chair far too small for him, while six little ones - two boys and four girls - sat around him, eagerly observing what he was doing. Alina could hear the conversation and the laughter.

"Can you make horses out of your shadows?"

"That is *fantastic* -"

"Wow. And what about dragons?"

"Not sure, Vadim, let me try -"

"I wish I could do that, instead of causing floods! -"

"Being a tidemaker is an amazing gift, Vanya -"

"Is *not*. All I do is get people around me drenched -"

"How come you never get Miss Smirnova drenched?"

"I can't get Miss Smirnova drenched, she will be mad at me if I do -"

"Can you make shadow puppies again, General?"

Alina watched it all, completely endeared, feeling slightly more in love with Aleksnader, whose back was turned to her, and who couldn't see her observing. At one point, a tidesmaker boy saw her. She placed a pointing finger against her lips, shushing him, and decided she could very well surprise her husband. She pressed her plans together and Summoned - three delicate orbs of sunshine, which she sent towards Aleksander and the children. The effect was instantaneous and while the children exclaimed with joy, Aleksander turned around, his grin widening when he saw her.

"Come join us," he beckoned her, his palm turned upwards and open. Alina walked inside, pulling one tiny chair close to Aleksander and sitting down. It was just slightly uncomfortable, but despite her stomach and the narrow seats he managed to settle.

"Can you make sun animals, Lady Alina?" one of the little girls asked. Vanya bumped her with an elbow. "Ow! Vanya!"

"She is the Sun Summoner! You can't just ask Sun Summoner to make you sun puppies -"

"But you asked *the General* to make *shadow dragons*, Vanya," another girl said. Alina glanced at Aleksander who seemed thoroughly amused and uncharacteristically soft.

"Well he is not the Sun Summoner, Irina," Vanya answered indignantly. Aleksander grinned, leaning towards Alina.

"Indeed, I am not," Aleksander whispered.

"Well, I have never tried making sunshine animals," Alina said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "But I can try."

"Maybe we can help you?" Aleksander offered, eliciting a cheer from their tiny audience. They spent another twenty minutes with the children, and although Alina didn't manage to create animals with her light, she had fun. Eventually, they had to leave after the children were called for a dinner, and even though Aleksnader held her hand as they slowly walked towards their part of the Palace, Alina could feel heaviness settling over him.

"Have a walk with me?" he asked, uncharacteristically quiet. Alina agreed, letting him hold her hand all the while, as they went out and into the gardens. This time when he went to pick the roses for her, Alina did not protest.

"You're worried," she said softly after he brought her a flower, all of its thorns carefully removed.

"I wish I could divest the world of its thorns," he said. "The monarchs are one... their new General another... Fjerda and Shu Han another....," he sighed. Alina placed the white flower near her face, observing him as she did so. "I'm not sure what your unlikely friends are."

"People looking for a way to survive," Alina offered.

"Not particularly bothered whom they might hurt while doing so," Aleksander said. Alina took his arm, placing her fingers over his bicep.

"You do realize how that sounds, coming from you?" Alina said lightly, looking up at his profile. He raised his chin just slightly. "This is a world where everyone is fighting for themselves. Is it not?"

"True," Aleksander said. "But I am not eager to offer any kind of cooperation to people who were going to sell you into slavery."

"They're efficient and they can be bought," Alina pointed out.

"Which means, Vorkoff could buy their services as well," Aleksander said.

"True," Alina said. "That could happen without you making them any sort of an offer. Without attempting anything."

"True," Aleksander said. He paused walking and stood in front of her. "I wish I knew what exactly we're up against," he said. "The stakes have never been this high," he added, looking at her, over her face and then her entire body. "I cannot afford a mistake, milaya."

"I know," she pulled him close, until she could place her cheek against his chest and wrap her arms around him. "But you are not alone," she whispered, feeling his arms wrapping gently around her. "There are many of us who will gladly help you."

*

The following day had been just as sunny and lovely as Genya said it would be. Alina was wearing her summer kefta, a much lighter garment, carefully tailored and impeccably embroidered with golden and black thread, over a simple dress. She didn't necessarily need new silk, or a new dress, but she understood that their little outing to the capital had more than just one purpose.

She waited by the carriage, with Genya for company, wishing that Aleksander would hurry. The day was getting warmer and she could do with taking off her kefta, wishing they could simply go to the fountain in the woods that he showed her a long time ago and have a picnic there, instead of walking through the streets crowded with people, who would, undoubtedly, look at every movement she made. But that was the point, she was well aware of it.

And just as she was about to remove her kefta - Ivan could complain about it later all he wanted, she was getting progressively uncomfortable - something out of the ordinary happened - several First Army soldiers appeared from the side entry of the Little Palace, each man carrying what seemed like a wooden cart loaded with supplies. Alina frowned, wondering what that was about, guessing that perhaps they were sending another

round of supplies to the refugees. If that was the case Aleksander forgot to tell her, but what was strange were the soldiers. Normally, the Grisha did this.

Mal was among them.

He saw her. She could see an odd mix of expressions on his face, surprise and then relief covering something else. She could see the way he paused, the way he pressed his lips, the uncertainty over if he could simply approach her. She had to tell him, at some point, that she was nobody's property, and that they still could greet each other.

"Your friend?" Genya asked and Alina nodded.

"Yes. I will go say hello," Alina said, starting to walk towards Mal's group. She didn't have to go all the way - the soldiers stopped and Mal lowered his crate to the ground, crossing the distance to her at several decisive strides.

"Alina," he said, and even though his smile seemed genuine it was somehow cut short.

"Hello Mal," she told him, observing the strange set of his shoulders.

"Well I'm glad I ran into you," he said. "I hoped to tell you something," he said.

Alina wanted to ask what, but something in his expression stopped her. It wasn't a premonition what she felt, the feeling of foreboding that always somehow proved to be correct; it was something else. She could see that he was troubled, but he wasn't going to tell her why. That wasn't what he was going to tell her.

"I am getting transferred," he said. "To the north."

"Oh," she said. "Why? Just you or entire unit -?"

"A few of us," he said, his response pointedly vague. She could feel her mood darken. "Don't worry. You know how it is," he said, with an easy shrug she knew too well. She also knew it was nothing but easy.

"You cannot tell me," she said.

"No, afraid not," he said. "You know how that works too -"

"Yes I do," Alina said, thinking of the implications, of the fact that he was in the First Army, commanded by a man who wanted to get rid of her husband, of her - who planned Saints knew what. A part of her wanted to warn Mal, wanted to tell him that not everything was what it seemed, but then he smiled. An honest smile, meant to comfort.

"Why a long face? You know I can take care of myself," he said.

"I also know you can find trouble in a blink of an eye," Alina told him.

"Which I won't do," he said. "I promise," he fell silent, his expression odd and difficult to read. "Stay safe, Alina," he said.

"I will," she told him, wondering if she could hold to that promise and what awaited them all.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you go - we're about to get some additions to our main cast, which should happen soon. Also, Mal is going away, but we're not saying goodbye to him quite yet. As the plot thickens, I'm hoping you're still enjoying this story.

Find me on tumblr @ vesperass-anuna

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm so sorry for being absent for so long. I haven't forgotten this story - my holidays were busy and stressful, and I've been having health issues lately. Here is a new chapter, which I already teased with my previous story "The photograph". Everyone who was excited to see The Crows enter the main storyline, here you go! This is your chapter and I hope you'll enjoy it.

See you in the comments, yes? :)

Alina assumed there were worse ways of spending an afternoon than discussing the curtains in long and painful detail with the most annoying woman she had ever met. If there were, she was failing to think of them, and as Lady Novakova kept talking about texture and fabrics and colors and what matches better with the spine of the books she held on the bookshelf, Alina glanced at Ivan who stood near the door, positioned to neutralize any threat that might appear. Well, any threat except the death of boredom.

"What do you think?" Lady Novakova asked, looking expectantly at Alina after such a long speech that Alina simply zoned out, thinking of baked potatoes with ham that Oleg promised her for dinner.

"I... ah. I agree," Alina said, glancing at Genya for help.

"Oh! How lovely! I am so happy you do, I will see that your new curtains are delivered as soon as possible," the woman was saying. Alina gave Genya another look, but Genya shrugged -- she actually *shrugged*.

"Whatever she has in mind, it's probably quite nice - she may be airheaded but she has a great taste," Genya whispered into Alina's ear.

"What was that?" Lady Novakova asked.

"Oh, Miss Safin was just saying how your taste is impeccable," Alina said, regretting her decision to host the charity dinner, but if Alina wanted it to be done right, if she wanted the funds gathered to be used as planned, she felt she had to do it herself. No, she *knew* she had to do it, and supervise it. Aleksander helped with generous advice, listening to her thoughts and helping her resolve her doubts, ready to attend and be the model husband to Sankta Alina, protector of the refugees - but this part, he couldn't help her with. "And I am in full and complete agreement," Alina added with a smile, wondering if she was merely becoming a politician. The woman either couldn't tell if the smile was fake or she did not care - she was a prominent member of the court, someone appointed by the Queen to help Lady Kirigan in her noble attempts, which meant Alina had to put up with nonsense for the sake of her endeavor. In the end the only thing that mattered was how something looked - not what it really was like. Alina was immeasurably annoyed by that.

"Oh, but that is so very sweet of you," Lady Novakova said, deciding that it was time to discuss the teacups. Alina looked at Ivan again, and to her utter misery, it seemed like he was trying not to grin, while the discussion turned toward the teacups in different floral decorations. It was of utmost importance if the tea would be served in green and gold teacups, or white ones with blue flowers. Alina's back was starting to hurt, but she was adamant to get through this meeting in its entirety with a polite smile on her face. Genya suggested they should have an actual tea, possibly guessing that Alina was getting tired of standing and walking around. Lady Novakova graciously accepted, Alina felt immense relief, so much that even following Lady Novakova's ramblings was easier.

And just when Alina felt she was going to doze off, there was a sharp knock on the door.

"I wasn't aware you were expecting someone, Lady Kirigan," Lady Novakova said, as Alina and Genya shared glances.

"I am not. Ivan, would you please ...?" Alina asked, not sure what to make of this. Her instructions to the staff were precise - if someone was looking for her, then something important must have happened. She shared another look with Genya, whose expression turned concerned, and even Lady Novakova stopped narrating all of her thoughts until Ivan returned.

The fact that he strode into the room and towards Alina said that whatever this was - it was important and that she had to deal with it.

"Moya Soverenya," Ivan said as he bowed to all three ladies. "I am afraid you are needed."

Alina wondered if Lady Novakova, whose sense of tact and consideration for others was nearly not existing, would say something about how inappropriate this is. How it was of utmost importance to nail down all the details of the charity dinner, but she did not say a thing. Alina wasn't certain if it was merely Ivan's presence or some sneaky heartrendering - the woman just nodded in understanding as Alina said she would like to excuse herself and asked Genya to keep their esteemed guest company until they finished their tea.

Alina followed Ivan, who didn't stop until they exited the hallway where the grand salon was. He was leading her towards Aleksander's rooms, pointedly trying not to walk too fast, not speaking to her at all; and if he acted this way, he probably had a good reason.

Ivan opened the door to the War room for Alina and walked inside behind her, closing the door securely and pausing to look and listen before he neared Alina.

"What happened?" she asked finally, when she was certain that they were alone and not listened to.

"Fedyor has returned," Ivan said without preamble or explanation. Alina knew what that meant. "His mission was successful."

“Oh,” Alina said. “And -?”

“The targets were secured. They’re placed in custody as previously discussed,” Ivan explained - which meant that her captors and then allies were all brought to Little Palace as planned, each of them given a separate room.

“And my husband?”

“Still away in Os Alta,” Ivan said. “I would prefer to escort Lady Novakova back to the Grand Palace,” he said and Alina nodded. It wasn’t explicitly discussed but an outsider being present at the Little Palace while the plan was beginning to unfold posed a completely unnecessary risk - even an outsider as clueless and self centered as Lady Novakova.

“I am in agreement,” Alina told him. “Wait for fifteen minutes and then use an excuse - that I am feeling unwell, or anything that sounds plausible. Escort her yourself, please,” Alina said. “I wish to speak to Miss Ghafa,” she added then.

“I have arranged for Fedyor to wait for you in front of her suite,” Ivan informed. “Just as we have planned.”

“Mister Brekker and Mister Fahey?”

“Both are doing fine, although all of them had to be restrained. Mister Brekker was particularly uncooperative, as I’ve heard.”

Alina sighed. “As we have expected,” she said. “Fine. Let Mister Brekker and Mister Fahey wait, as we have agreed upon. I will go talk to Miss Ghafa.”

Ivan nodded. “If I may add, her collection of weapons is... extraordinary.”

“As I am aware. It’s no wonder that she swears by them,” Alina said and then turning thoughtful, she looked at Ivan. “I know that your previous encounter with them was very unpleasant. But consider - what kind of life did she have, in order to become like that? carry so many knives on her person, learn to throw them ...?”

“An unkind life,” Ivan replied, completely serious.

“What an unkind world that we live in,” Alina said, deciding to focus on things she could affect right now and right here. “Can you accompany me to Fedyor now?”

*

The door to Mesyats suite was tightly locked and Fedoyr awaited in front of it, his hands clasped behind his back. His stern face relaxed when he saw Alina, and she smiled with relief because he looked whole and unharmed.

“Fedyor, are you well?” she asked. He bowed his head slightly and smiled in return.

“Not even a hair missing from my head, Moya Soverenya. Thank you for your concern,” he said.

“And our new friends?”

“Not so friendly, I would say. Miss Ghafa seems worried,” he observed. “She is rather protective over Mister Brekker who, in turn, doesn’t bother considering his own safety,” he said.

“Oh? Did he try to fight his way out?”

“Yes, just as I expected. I did not harm him, I stated as much both to him and to Miss Ghafa who... well, she was still very worried. She is still worried,” Fedyor informed. “I can feel it from here.”

“Well, I guess it's best if I go and talk to her,” Alina said. Fedyor unlocked the door and let Alina step inside, following her.

When Alina stepped into the room, Inej was sitting on the edge of the bed - it was just as big as her old bed in the Vezda suite, only slightly less adorned with lace and frills. Alina noticed that the sheets were practically untouched, just as the rest of the room, and the young woman’s posture had been rigid and tense. However, when she heard the door, she stood up, stepping near the bedpost, partially shielding herself from Alina and Fedyor who followed her.

“Inej? It’s me. It’s Alina,” she said softly, remaining on the spot near the door. Fedyor too remained where he was.

Alina watched as the girl pried herself away from the wide wooden pillar and then carefully looked in Alina’s direction. Her eyes were mistrustful and guarded, reminding Alina momentarily of the moment when Aleksander placed the collar of antlers onto her.

Inej said nothing for several moments, and Alina decided to step closer. “I’m very sorry we brought you here like this,” she said.

“He hurt Kaz,” Inej replied.

“He didn’t. Kaz is fine,” Alina told her.

“Where is he?”

"You can go and see him," Alina said. "I would like to talk to you first, but if you're worried about Kaz, you can go and see him."

Inej seemed to hesitate, her eyes stuck on Alina, roaming all over her as if she was searching for something. She glanced at Fedyor then, not saying anything, but her eyes were anything but silent. Alina turned towards the heartrender.

"You can leave us now," Alina said. They have agreed upon this before, because Alina assumed correctly that Inej wouldn't be willing to talk in front of a person who brought her here by force. Fedyor left and for a couple of moments, Inej kept studying Alina in much the same manner - suddenly, her shoulders sagged, but her eyes remained alert.

"Inej, I'm so so-" Alina started, but she was interrupted.

"Are you okay? Are you safe here?" the girl asked, urgency and worry filling her voice as she looked Alina all over - her face, her hair, her hands and her stomach.

"I'm okay. I am safe and I am well, I *promise* I am well," she said. Only then Inej seemed to relax and she smiled.

"And did he not -" Inej started to ask and then stopped herself, her eyes asking for permission and forgiveness at the same time. Her eyes fell to Alina's stomach again, obviously round now. Her pregnancy was impossible not to notice at this point, and dresses could not conceal it - nor did Alina want it to.

Alina smiled in return, realizing what must have been going through Inej's mind. Alina imagined that the girl heard of the marriage and the treaty, and she remembered quite vividly what Inej had done in order to defend her.

"He did not hurt me. Not once," Alina assured. Inej brought her hands to her face, her eyes overflowing with emotion Alina still didn't understand quite completely and it always stunned her when she saw it on people who revered her as a Saint. Something that was still beyond the grasp of her comprehension. She could not explain to herself why this girl was ready to go into a fight for her - but she did know she didn't want Inej to be hurt.

"So you are well, truly well?" Inej asked. Alina grasped her hands and smiled, nodding and suddenly wishing to tell Inej how she's been happy once she let herself be - but feeling overwhelmed and emotional herself all Alina could do at that moment was pull her closer and hug her. She heard how Inej sighed, felt how tentatively she returned the embrace, how she gradually relaxed, as much as Alina's stomach would allow. "Oh. Did I... did I hug too tight?"

"Oh, no, it's fine," Alina smiled and then laughed a bit and Inej laughed with her, looking down at her belly again.

"It's... this is--- you look well," Inej said. "I saw your photo in the newspaper. And we've heard... uhhh. So many things. We did not know which was the truth."

"I can tell you," Alina said. "But let's sit down for that, because standing for long periods of time tends to be uncomfortable. Are you hungry?"

Inej blinked, looking at Alina almost as if she remembered only then that hunger still existed.

*

"My husband is a fearsome creature. Sometimes ruthless," she said as she slowly stirred honey into her tea, and Inej listened, completely engrossed in Alina's telling. "He tried to protect the Grisha all of his life, with varied success. The victories have been fewer than the losses, and the losses... they came at great personal costs," Alina said.

"Have you forgiven him?" Inej asked. All of her questions and inquiries were personal, but not unpleasant to Alina.

"Yes," she said calmly, then looked at Inej seriously. "We're in danger."

"You? You and him, and -?"

"Me, him, our child, all of the Grisha, we're in danger. There are men in the Tsar's court that want to get rid of Aleksander. They want to ... I am not sure what they are trying to do. But they are trying to mislead him, cause him to make a mistake, to have an excuse to make us all look like monsters again."

"How... how would they do that?"

"By forcing his hand. Making decisions, military decisions that later prove to be wrong. Cruel. harmful to the country, the people, to the crown."

"Oh."

"And we need to find out... what exactly they're trying to do," Alina said.

"That's... that's why you sent your men for us," Inej said. Alina nodded.

"Again, I am sorry -"

"I understand," Inej said. "It wasn't exactly pleasant, but Kaz would have never agreed to come here on his own."

"And you?"

Inej straightened, looking at her hands. It seemed that even though the decision was hard, in her heart it was already made.

"I have promised you my hand. You have it," she said simply.

Alina wanted to speak but a knock on the door interrupted them. A moment later the door opened and Aleksander walked inside.

"Oh, finally," Alina said and stood, going to him - normally she would have hugged him and kissed him, but she was aware of both Inej's tension, and Aleksander's as well. She grasped his hands, her fingers locking with his, and then she looked at Inej.

"By Sains," Inej whispered.

"Miss Ghafa, I presume?" Aleksander asked. His tone was sharp but not unkind, despite the mistrust that Alina could feel. Inej did not reply - she stood, though, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Yes," she said.

"We finally meet," he said, observing her, while holding Alina's hand. "My wife seems to have utmost trust in you," he paused and when Inej didn't say anything, Aleksander continued. "We want to make you an offer. You, and your friends as well. But in order to do that, you need to come with us," he said.

"Yes," Inej agreed.

"Good. Well, let's go then," Aleksander said.

*

The heartrenders brought Kaz and Jesper a couple of moments after Alina and Aleksander arrived with Inej to the War room. Jesper seemed vary, but when he saw Inej and Kaz his relief was obvious. Kaz, walking with difficulty sans his cane, was impossible to read beyond looking angry and ready to fight. Ivan and Fedyor came into the room as well, taking their places near Aleksander and Alina.

"Mister Brekker," Aleksander spoke slowly as three thieves stood close to one another. "Your friends are fine and unharmed, I assure you."

"How kind," Kaz said, his eyes stuck on Alina.

"My *wife* is fine as well," Aleksander said, and Kaz's lip twitched.

"How else would she be," Kaz answered, his tone laced with sarcasm.

"She *is* fine," Inej spoke. Kaz glanced sharply at her. "Stop it, Kaz. Hear them out."

"Have you made deals with them -??"

"No," Inej's back was straight and rigid. "I did promise my hand to the Sun Summoner. Or have you forgotten?"

Kaz didn't say anything. Jesper seemed to look between two of his friends, and then broke the tension.

"What is this all about? Why did you drag us here? It's not like you lack manpower," Jesper told Aleksander.

"Seems that Mister Fahey is the more reasonable person here. I have sent for you to give you an offer," Aleksander said, looking from Jesper to Kaz again.

"An offer?"

"A job offer, Mister Brekker. I assume you know how that works."

Kaz didn't say anything. "I would pay you," Aleksander continued, to which Kaz snorted. "Oh, rest assured that I *can* pay, and I can pay well. But you would gain something else as well."

"And what is that?"

"There are two things. I hear you have run into conflicts with a man named Pekka Rollins, yes? Wouldn't it be useful to have... *resources* to come to terms with him?" Aleksander paused, keeping his eyes on Kaz. Alina wondered what went on between two of them, that she had no knowledge of - she felt that Aleksander had some kind of unresolved business with the man, and that he was determined to give him a lesson. "Second... I suspect it would be much better if the Darkling wasn't on the long list of your enemies, yes?"

"And I should just trust you on that?"

"No more than I should trust you," Aleksander said. "But that makes a good business deal. I need your services just as much as you need the money, and to get rid of your enemies. In fact... you might be on the winning side here, as you clearly gain more than I do," Aleksander said, pausing and walking over to the cabinet to fetch drinks. Alina observed as he brought the glasses to the large War table, followed by several bottles as well. Alina declined the drink, but nobody else did so, and hence Aleksander proceeded to pour the brown looking liquid into fine

glasses. Kaz was silent for a long time, studying all the people in the room, his eyes inquiring and guarded - they kept returning to Alina, as if he was checking, just as Inej did, if she truly was fine.

Finally he took one glass.

“Fine. Let’s hear your offer.”

Alina could *feel* Aleksander’s smugness over those words. However he did a damn good job of not showing it *at all*.

“I am pleased that you’re willing to consider my offer,” Aleksander said. He moved towards the map, and everyone else followed suit - soon they were standing around the War table, reminding Alina of a similar scene when she first suggested trying to hire Kaz Brekker and his friends. “What I need are spies -”

“I am not a spy,” Kaz remarked.

“But you were willing to play a mercenary, weren’t you?” Aleksander asked. “I’d say you can be anything you want to be, Mister Brekker... given that you’re paid enough.”

There was a strained expression on Kaz’s face, but he remained silent. It was Inej who spoke up.

“We didn’t sell her. It was wrong. We did not do it -”

“I know,” Alina said. Inej looked at Kaz.

“Perhaps agreeing to do it was wrong in the first place.”

“And how can we tell this is not wrong?” Kaz hissed, looking at Inej.

“I won’t ask you to sell anyone, Mister Brekker. Or hurt anyone, for that matter,” Aleksander paused, pointing at the specific place on the map. “Have you ever heard of the Monseno monastery?”

Kaz shook his head.

“I have,” Jesper said. “The silent monks.”

“That’s right, Mister Fahey. A saint used to live there. Many people go there, seeking shelter and penance. It’s a place of peace. It has a vast library and it’s important to the people living in the valley. Lately,” Aleksander paused. “There have been unexplained Fjerdan attacks in that area. They’re too many, they happen too often to just be usual groups of Druskelle, coming in from the north. There are some suspicions raised regarding the monastery.”

“You think the Druskelle are hiding inside of the monastery?” Kaz asked.

“That is the theory, Mister Brekker. But I do not share it,” Aleksander said.

“How so?”

“I prefer basing my beliefs and actions on evidence, not hunches. Destroying a monastery, with all of its resources and killing everyone in it is not something I’m inclined to do,” Aleksander said. “Besides I suspect the theory is not the truth.”

“What is the truth, then? Someone wants to set you up?” Kaz asked, his lips stretching into an unpleasant smile. “Someone trying to trick you into military action against innocents?”

“I *appreciate* your intelligence, Mister Brekker.”

“Why should I help you? Wouldn’t I prefer someone destroying you? As you are, you said so yourself, my enemy?”

Aleksander inclined his head, as if he were amused. “Fair point. There are few things to consider,” he looked at Alina. “Whatever should happen to me, my enemies have intended for the Sun Summoner as well,” he said calmly. Alina took a deep breath and placed both hands on her stomach, a gesture that didn’t go unnoticed by anyone. Kaz remained calm - he even shrugged - but a twitch on his face revealed that he didn’t feel as indifferent as he was trying to paint himself. “Another thing to consider is that I am not easily defeated.”

Kaz sneered. “Are you threatening me?”

“I have no problem making direct threats, Mister Brekker. I am simply showing you the pros and cons to consider.”

“Fine,” Kaz said, taking his glass and drinking from it. “I want time to consider what you’re offering. And I want to discuss this with my... associates.”

“That’s perfectly fine with me,” Aleksander said, nodding at Ivan and Fedyor. “Please escort mister Brekker and his friends to the kitchens. See that they’re served a proper meal, and that they have an opportunity to discuss this. Escort them to their rooms after.”

“Moy Soverenyi,” Ivan nodded and then looked at the three thieves. “Follow me.”

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I will be honest with you all - this chapter could have been longer, but I've had a terrible month, a serious health scare, a very bad past few days; my inspiration has been lacking, I've found myself in a phase where it's hard to write (and no, please don't suggest taking a break, because I've been forced into one and did not enjoy it) --- all I want is some loving and interaction and to talk about these two dorks being in love with each other. here you go. before we proceed with the main fic, I want to write one from Crows' point of view. Comments and talking about the story are welcome, wanted, cherished and enjoyed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The evening was warm and mild, mild enough for Alina to forgo her kefta and wear just a simple dress. She shared a tea with Fedyor and David, listening to them talk about some of David's new inventions, too tired to even properly focus after the intense discussion in the War Room. She decided to take a walk then, and Fedyor went with her, giving her space to just think and try to sort out her thoughts.

Aleksander acted... *strange*. She had seen him angry and furious; she had seen him tense and worried and scared, but the way he acted around Kaz Brekker was an oddity - almost as if Aleksander wanted to *prove* something, an undercurrent of competition that, to Alina, came out of nowhere. After the conversation ended and the three thieves were escorted to the kitchens, Aleksander claimed he had reports to review. That, perhaps, was true; but Alina knew that in reality he wanted to be left alone. And so, she gave him space.

At the same time she felt *unsettled*, but she told herself, firmly, that Aleksander needed peace and that she could use some herself.

They have agreed upon the fact that the less people know about their new associates, the better. Alina suggested they should provide staff uniforms for the newcomers, which should make them look less suspicious even if they had to cross a hallway or two. Alina decided to deliver the uniforms personally, early the next morning. Enemies or associates, the trio needed to rest, and Alina assumed they would be more inclined to accept the offer if they were treated kindly, and even if they didn't, if this was all in vain? She'd rather be kind than cruel.

She paused and sighed. Would they even agree to help them?

She started sorting out her plans in her mind, wandering into the garden, drawn to the rosebushes that looked lush and beautiful. She picked a white flower on a long stem, strange tension clutching at her chest.

"Let's go back," she told Fedyor who nodded amiably and followed along as she slowly walked. The unpleasant feeling intensified as they approached the familiar walls - within them, she knew, were three people who could prove either allies or foes, and Alina wondered if she had made a mistake; if everyone around her made one by listening to her. Holding a delicate flower in her hand, Alina made her way up the stairs, through the hallways she knew by heart, looking for one person who could give her peace.

He wasn't in the library, or the War room, he wasn't in his study even though the fire was cracking at the hearth and there was a book left open on the table, along with several maps he had to leave behind, possibly planning to return to them. Feeling tired and dejected she thought about the comfort of the pillows and the blankets, heading to the bedroom. Once there, she noticed that the bathchamber door had been opened.

Alina peered inside - there he was, standing next to the filled bathtub, shrugging off his dark robe, his back turned to her. No matter how many times she had seen the scars that littered almost every bit of him, she would still flinch at the sight.

"Sasha," she whispered and he turned halfway, his robe gathered in front of his body. The tension seemed to leave him at the sight of her and he smiled, making her smile in return.

"I was going to take a bath," he said. "Would you like to -?"

He gestured towards the tub. Alina could feel the scent of his favorite bathing salt, thought about the promise of the warmth and water, and washing this entire day off of her body and out of her mind. She easily agreed, but her smile faltered a little even while Aleksander watched her.

"I just need to pull up my hair," she told him, wanting to busy her hands, as he left his robe on a chair and moved closer.

"I can do that," he offered, his eyes falling to the sole white rose she was holding.

"For you," she said then, echoing his words from eternity ago, when he gave her irises at the Winter Fete.

He took the flower, watching her, and all Alina could do was observe how emotions on his face changed, how he looked at the flower with unsaid longing and placed it on the rim of the bathtub before going back to her. His expression tugged at something in her chest, something coiled and tight that suddenly threatened to unspool.

"What are you so worried about?" he asked softly while he took care of her hair; two braids easily pinned at the top of her head, and he'd done it quickly, efficiently, a skill that seemed second nature, something he was accustomed to. Alina bit her lip as he helped her out of her clothes, not pressing for an answer - instead he kissed her, on the nape of her neck, her shoulder, the side of her cheek. "Come on now," he said, one hand gentle on her waist, his voice soothing her nerves. "Let's have a bath."

She followed, remembering how she did this for him when he was ill, how he trusted her to take care of him; how much trust it had to entail for him to willingly give himself into her attention back then. She thought about how much he had to want to mend what he had broken, how it had to

cost him to be so vulnerable and helpless with her.

Aleksander stepped into the tub first and held out his hands for her - Alina was still steady on her feet even though her stomach was prominent and round and walking was definitely different than it used to be. Still, he was caring and careful, offering her support just in case she needed it. They settled into the water, Alina's back nestled against Aleksander's front, the warmth and his closeness feeling every bit as wonderful as Alina wished for. mHe pulled her closer still, his arm across her chest, gently, coaxing her to lean fully into him.

"Let's give you a bath, shall we?" he was whispering, a soapy sponge in his hand. He rubbed it over her arms, her chest, her shoulders, all very gently - but even if his motions were soothing and his voice soft in her ear Alina couldn't let go of the tension that just grew. "Sweetheart," he said as he stopped. "What's wrong?"

Alina leaned against his shoulder feeling the tears as they rolled down her cheeks, and at the same time, she felt Aleksander wrapping his arms around her. She wanted to hold it in, he didn't deserve to deal with her moods and insecurities and worries on top of his own, but the softer he got, attentive and soothing and just there, the knot inside her chest wanted to tug itself free more badly. She started to cry, audibly, turning halfway into his embrace and sobbing, held safely, securely, until her crying eased off and the tightness in her chest seemed to loosen.

Aleksander kissed her forehead. "Let's dry up and go to bed, what do you say?" he offered. She thought how he probably had more work, how he ought to have more errands - but she found herself nodding, wanting and needing all the comfort he was promising her.

He helped her stand, wrapped her in a towel, much like what she did for him all that time ago, patted her dry before he did it himself as well. The evening was warm, a pleasant breeze coming through the window, but the night would grow cold and she needed a shift and the blankets awaiting them on the bed. She pulled a shift over her head and settled on the mattress, waiting as Aleksander got dressed, took off his talon ring and then joined her, pulling her into an embrace.

"Will you tell me, my love?"

It was so hard to resist that voice and his soothing tone as she snuggled as close as her rounded stomach would allow. She wondered how they would sleep when her stomach grew, accustomed to snuggle as close to Aleksander as she liked. She pulled the blanket up to her ears, not for the cold, but for the sense of covers over her, as Aleksander tried to soothe her and coax her to tell him what was bothering her.

"I'm afraid I made a mistake," she finally said, quiet and small, her face close to his chest. She couldn't even look at him - how bold and stupid was it to suggest to involve Kaz Brekker in all of this? Aleksander's hand stilled on her shoulder.

"How so?" he said and she felt his lips on top of her head. He wasn't judging, he was listening, but she couldn't make herself look into his eyes.

"I put us all in danger. I thought I was being smart, that we could... use them as spies, but... but they could turn on us and it will all be my fault and -"

"Alina," Aleksander whispered, his voice firm enough to make her look up. There was no judgment in his eyes - just darkness that was vast and heavy, but it was also familiar and soothing, and she remembered - realized - that he probably made so many decisions and choices like this one, that he had to, in order to survive all the centuries that he carried on his back. "No. You didn't make a mistake -"

"How can you be so sure? I was - I thought -"

He pulled her as close as possible, his lips against her forehead. "You made all the calculations with all the knowledge at your disposal. I would have never agreed if I thought there was no chance for this to work. I heard all you had to say, and I agreed with you -"

She shuddered and nodded, but her mind still raced.

"It's never a safe bet. Not a single decision, especially not in a situation like this one. We have to take risks and we have to do the best with what we have -"

"Maybe there was a better way. Maybe -," she sighed and stilled, shivering under the covers. "I know Inej wants to help me, but Kaz -"

"He thinks I am after his neck. His and the other two," Aleksander explained. "And he's mistrustful and possibly berating himself for all the previously made decisions."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I would feel exactly like that. He feels like a caged animal and if pushed too far, he'll bite."

"You weren't exactly gentle today," Alina observed, no judgment but a slight surprise in her tone.

"He kidnapped you. He meant to, at least," Aleksander burrowed his face against her hair. "He was ready to sell you. And he -"

"He... what-?"

He sighed. Alina could feel him tense, could feel him press his nose against her hair and take a deep breath.

"He told me that you left. That... they didn't take you, that you ran away from me," she could feel his shudder and through her power she could feel the pain, the memory of that moment, the vulnerability in his voice. "That you... *left me*."

So that was it, she thought. The tension, the back and forth, the feeling that Aleksander was trying to prove something to a young man with a bad leg and too much brash courage, when there was nothing to prove and too much to lose.

“Oh Sasha,” she said, feeling that he needed reassurance as much as she did, that she needed to hear him say she had done her best and he needed her to tell him something in return. “I wish I never left. i wish I knew, understood, paused to think instead of being so easily frightened -”

“It’s.... I know why you did it. i know who caused it, I understand -”

“And still,” Alina pressed, “I wish I never caused you that kind of suffering.”

“Shh, my love,” he kissed her forehead. “It’s over now. It’s been done. We cannot fix the past.”

“But we can mess up the present,” she said.

“We can. Anyone can,” he sighed, cradling her gently, his hand soothing down her back, along her side, settling finally on her stomach. “But not making any decision, not trying to do anything, out of fear, that is infinitely worse. Trust me. I have tried it,” he was whispering, and she believed him, believed his words, his lips against her cheek. “I will not let anyone hurt you. Hurt us,” he said, his fingers spread over the swell of her. Alina blinked through fresh tears seeking out his lips, needing his touch and his comfort, his passion and his conviction. She was ready to give in into the kiss, into his touch and caresses, the way his body angled next to hers, the familiar pleasure that took away all the anxious thoughts, every doubt and fear - and then she stopped.

She had to, because there was an odd sensation, something she never felt before as she broke the kiss and gasped.

A flutter, a movement inside her stomach, delicate, small, but definitely *there* .

“Alina? Are you alright?”

“Oh, I,” she looked at him, eyes wide, feeling sudden excitement as she felt the flutter again. She grabbed his fingers and pressed them against the spot on her stomach where she felt it, but she knew from everything that Sonya had told her that some time would pass before her baby’s movements could be felt on the *outside* . Still, she asked, “Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The baby,” she said, a smile overtaking her as he watched her, surprised. “It feels... like barest touch, like a tickle inside. Here,” she moved his hand with hers. “Oh. Again -”

“Really?” she could see a smile blossom on his face and overtake his features.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Oh, and again,” she said.

“I can’t feel the flutter, but I can feel how excited you are,” he told her, his hand caressing her belly. “This is the first time -?”

“Yes,” she said. “He’s grown, then.”

“He?” Aleksander asked, as if she revealed another wondrous thing, both of his hands holding her stomach with utmost caring and love.

“I think so,” Alina said, not sure if that was merely a desire or her feeling that their baby might be a boy. “I would very much love to have a son,” she told him, watching as his face became ever gentler.

“Is that so?”

Alina bit her lip and smiled. “A little boy, just like you. With dark hair and dark eyes and this smile,” she said as she cradled his face in her palm. “As brilliant and devoted as you.”

“Well he ought to have something yours,” Aleksander said, pulling close to nudge her nose with his. “Your wit and kind heart, and *your smile* -”

“He can’t have both your smile and mine,” Alina protested softly, sighing as he leaned his cheek against hers.

“I prefer yours,” Aleksander said. “Because it’s like the first sun of the dawn. Warmth to ward off the cold -”

“Well, I wish him to be a poet, then,” Alina said. “Just like you.”

He smiled. “You flatter me.”

“I speak the truth,” Alina answered, realizing that the tension melted away, and that she had calmed enough to settle. She yawned, exhausted, wrung out, having been worried and scared and comforted to the point of bone deep contentment. With flutters in her belly and the hum of Aleksander’s breathing she let herself relax and sleep.

The line "flutters in her belly" comes from Orlissa's amazing fic called "Beautiful, terrible, unsaid things". If you, somehow, haven't read that beauty, I suggest you do that. It's a tiny little line that somehow stayed with me and it won't leave my soul. I deemed it's opnly fair to pay it homage.

Shoutout to Middlemarch for describing and writing Aleksander liek a poet - headcanon is completely accepted. I feel that he tends to be poetic when he's very emotional.

I felt I needed to address the possibility of Crows turning against Alina and Aleksander; Alina realizing this and coming to deeper understanding how precarious the entire situation is. Can Crows be trusted? And if they can, what can assure Kaz Brekker's loyalty? (obviously - it's not solely the money, especially if Kaz thinks he's trapped and that he should be fighting against you).

I hope you enjoyed the bit of fluff and the tiny pregnancy event at the end - see you soon, in either a side fic or the new chapter. I hope it won't take as long as this one did.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone - I'm baaack! I'm sorry this update took so long - private issues, lots and lots of work, health problems and general state of the world proved to be quite an obstacle for writing and keeping myself motivated. Here's a new chapter, in which i play loosely with Jesper's backstory, writing it as it fits the purpose of this fic. For those who asked if there will be any discovery of his powers - here's your answer. Thank you all for your wonderful comments so far and please forgive me if I forgot to reply, or it took me too long. It's been a truly hard period and each of your kind words did and does matter to me. I'm sorry if I failed to reciprocate properly, as you've all deserved. Enjoy the chapter and check the notes at the end ;)

Also - can anyone here help me with uploading an artwork to this chapter? I tired but I obviously have no idea how to do it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)



A huge thank you to irony_rocks who was so kind and made this beautiful art. Thank you!!

Alina brushed her hair and tried to prepare herself for the day awaiting her. Her heart felt heavy as she thought about three of their unwilling guests, the conversations and encounters she planned for the day, halfway wishing that she was a spoiled noble man's wife, like many people imagined she was. She believed, firmly, that her spot was alongside the General, because one led by example - if she was her people's saint, a hope for the Grisha and Ravkans alike, she couldn't afford to hide from unpleasant things that came with her role.

"I can hear you thinking from over here," Aleksander spoke, leaning against the door frame between his bedroom and the War room. Alina looked up, realizing that her gaze and her thoughts had drifted far away as she sat on his bed and combed through her hair.

"So you've come here to tease me?" she smiled, she *made* herself smile, because despite everything she knew she had a reason to smile. And she reminded herself that she was doing all of this so that other people too could have these same reasons and the relative comfort and safety she had been enjoying.

"Oh no, I wouldn't dare tease my very powerful, pregnant wife," he came closer, with a unique, amused smile on his face, one that made her think he was up to something. "I merely wanted to show you something."

"Uh oh," Alina said, observing how he valiantly tried not to grin too widely, obviously pleased with something. "What is it?"

"It's a surprise," he said, offering his hand.

"A surprise," she repeated, feeling slightly incredulous because she didn't feel that it was quite the time for surprises, but here he was, eagerly expecting her to give him her hand and rise from the bed. She did so, looking around to find her robe, making a mental note of how lazy she had gotten - but as her stomach grew she found it more and more difficult to get up as early as she was used to, get ready as efficiently and quickly, or commit to as many tasks as she would have liked. Your body is doing a lot of work, Sonya had told her not too long ago, advising her to get more rest. Contrary to her expectation she didn't need as much convincing as it was necessary in the beginning - her body seemed to enjoy rest more and more.

"Indeed. But you'll need to come with me -"

"Well who would have thought," she joked, feeling lighter and letting him distract her with whatever he had planned. She pulled on her robe and tied it, a loose knot just over her bump, then offered her hand to Aleksander.

"Ah, not. This won't do," he said, his expression turning mock serious.

"It won't?"

"No. You'll have to close your eyes," he said and she would have protested, had she not been too curious for her own good. With a symbolic grumble she relented, closed her eyes and covered them with one hand, giving the other to Aleksander, to lead her.

They haven't gotten far, as far as she could tell - Aleksander was cheeky enough to gently spin her around before she felt his hands on her shoulders, steadying her.

"Alright," he said warmly. "You can open your eyes."

They were in her room, the one she barely even used, except to store books and clothes and share gossip sessions with Genya. Next to the bed, which was about as big as Aleksander's, only covered with cream colored sheets and bedding, stood something that wasn't there before.

"Oh *Saints*," Alina whispered when she saw the crib - a heavy looking thing, made in distinct, readily recognizable Shu style, with suns and moons richly engraved in wood, and delicate, soft looking bedding made in cream and gold. "Oh Aleksnader," she said, delighted and touched, and not sure if she wanted more to hug him or inspect his gift up close; finally deciding to have both - she pulled him with her, so that they stood over the crib, observing it.

"Do you like it?" he asked her very softly. She nodded, so many words seemingly wrapped tight inside her throat, unable to come out. She thought briefly if it had been too early, except she was halfway through her pregnancy and both she and the child, as Sonya regularly assured her, had been doing well. There was nothing to stop Aleksander, or herself, to start preparing for their baby; and it was in fact a reasonable thing to do, she supposed. But there was something else, something wedged inside her chest, not quite pain, but an ache as she observed the crib, the careful craftsmanship, and what must have been hours of effort to create the beauty in front of her.

"I do," Alina whispered as he positioned himself behind her, a hand placed on her shoulder, a hand that she took and pulled to rest over her heart. "It's....," that aching feeling didn't let her speak. She felt how Aleksander shifted closer, placing his chin on top of her head, the comfort of his gesture making her feel warm.

"I think I know," he said then, traces of a smile wrapped in his tone. "I think I can understand," he said, arms now wrapping around her. "I've lived for so long and I haven't - ever - consciously tried to have this. To have a community of brothers and sisters? Yes, that I did, but this," his voice trailed off and Alina's mind went to what she knew of his past, and what she could piece together - that losing Luda when he was still fairly young had to be a painful lesson that he couldn't forget or let go of enough to fantasize about a family, to fool himself that he could have one and hide it from the prying eyes and murderous hands. That he would rather be on his own, and alone, than risk such pain, such loss again. And she could imagine it all, keenly, feel the shape and the weight of such pain and loneliness because it was never in the stars for her - not for the little Alina Starkov, a starved, half sick orphan girl who could be a maid, but not a lady of the house, not a mother of children, not with a body that kept failing her.

"Did you want to have a family?" she asked him, feeling him shift to lean his cheek against her hair.

"Yes," he said, after a moment of thought.

"But you thought it was not safe," she added and felt how he nodded.

"And now it's... real," he said and something inside of her seemed to lock in a place. Alina blinked away the tears, realizing what the ache inside of her chest meant. Her belly was a part of her, and the sensations of her baby moving were still a gentle flutter, but this? This somehow made it all more real, not just to her but to the rest of the world. She wanted to tell Aleksander just that when someone knocked on the door - it was sharp and just a bit urgent.

"Yes?" Aleksander called out, loud enough to signal to anyone who might have been on the outside that it was fine for them to come in. Ivan opened the door and stepped in, and Sonya along with him. "What is it?"

"There... has been a development, moy soverenyi," Ivan said, his eyes shifting from Aleksander to Alina as they slowly parted from one another.

"A development?" Aleksander asked, his tone and posture becoming the general once more.

"Something we didn't expect," Ivan said.

*

"Sonya seems to have a suspicion -" Ivan began after the door of the War room was firmly closed.

"It's more than a suspicion, moy soverenyi," Sonya interjected politely, at which Ivan pointedly glared but didn't say anything. He sighed, visibly upset over whatever had happened. Aleksander looked at Sonya wordlessly prompting an explanation. "I have examined the three people you had apprehended," Sonya said. "As per your instruction."

"And?"

"Two are in reasonably good health. Miss Ghafa is doing quite fine, though she could benefit from better nourishment. Mister Brekker has an old leg injury and what seems to be permanent damage. I was able to alleviate some of his pain. I advised him on how to sit, walk and treat his leg to spare it from more injury, though he seemed pretty skeptical and frankly mistrustful. However, mister Fahey...", Sonya took a deep breath and then paused. "He has a wasting sickness, moy soverenyi," she said, matter of factly.

"He... what?"

"I am certain," Sonya said. "And all the usual signs are there -"

"He is well past fifteen years old. Without using his powers, he would have been dead by now," Ivan said.

"Except if he is using them," Sonya argued.

"Without proper training and being able to hide it from everyone around him?" Ivan said.

"There have been cases of materialki using their powers either subconsciously or in ways that aren't that easy to detect, aren't quite obvious. Fixing things before anyone discovers they're broken, for instance," Aleksander said. "Sometimes they weren't even aware of what they were doing, and it was enough to keep them alive, but not truly healthy."

"And you think that is the case with the boy?" Ivan asked.

"I can't know that, can I?" Aleksander replied.

"Can we test him?" Alina suggested.

"We can but you yourself know that tests can be faked," Aleksander said. "Especially if he knows what he is and doesn't want us to find out."

Alina frowned, her gaze drifting from Aleksander to Ivan, to Sonya; all of them seemingly lost in thought.

"Well, can we at least rule out some possibilities?" Ivan suggested. "I highly doubt he would be able to hide etheralki abilities for long."

"Agreed," Sonya said. "I don't think he would be able to hide if he was a healer or a heartreender either. People would notice him using those kinds of abilities as well."

Aleksander nodded thoughtfully. "I don't want to send an untrained, half sick Grisha to a long and possibly dangerous spy mission," he said, "Especially considering that he, and his friends, aren't exactly trustful or willing at this point. I don't want to put him in danger and I don't want to give them a reason to think I put them in danger on purpose."

"Miss Ghafa seems to be the one most open to the idea of accepting the mission," Ivan observed. "As much as I do not like it."

"So what should we do? If we cannot test Jesper, and assuming he won't tell us what is going on with him -?" Alina started, pausing when she noticed a shift in Aleksander's expression.

"A Grisha, any Grisha can hide their ability only if they're very skilled and very practiced. It means having their abilities under perfect control, withholding their power in case they are in danger or hurt," he said. Alina didn't bother covering her confusion and surprise.

"Are you suggesting we put Mister Fahey in danger? Considering his skills that... doesn't seem very wise," Alina said, thinking of what she knew about Jesper - he was a nearly impeccable sharpshooter.

"I would know," Ivan said grimly.

"I don't think we should be putting anyone in *actual* danger on purpose. Nobody is ever tested that way, and it's not something that would promote either trust or cooperation," Aleksander said. "We could ask him to demonstrate his ability."

"You mean, a shooting practice?" Ivan asked. "Because I know he's precise."

Aleksander just smirked.

“Yes. A young man like him, who probably puts a lot of pride in his skills shouldn’t reject a healthy, friendly competition between himself and, say, Mitya?”

“Our second best sharpshooter?” Sonya asked amusedly.

“Of course. We don’t want them to see what our best sharpshooter can do, do we?” Aleksander said.

*

Alina wasn’t exactly sure what Aleksander’s plan entailed, but when she grasped Inej’s hand and smiled, she tried to exude a sense of calm that the young woman obviously did not feel. Aleksander had told her that the shooting practice would be the easiest way to test his suspicions - to be able to see Jesper in action and gauge if his skill was a sharpshooter talent or mediated by carefully masked powers. Alina would wait with Inej, and she had no problem agreeing with that.

Alina liked Inej, because there seemed to be earnestness about her, some kind of fundamental goodness covered with layers of precaution and daggers. Their world certainly did not spare anyone - a tiny Suli girl would be no exception.

The War Room was empty when Alina finally brought Inej there, at the exact time Aleksander told her to arrive. Inej followed her with caution she probably wasn’t able to shake, but Alina thought that she seemed less distrustful than she had been only yesterday.

“Your healer visited me,” Inej said. Alina already knew that, but she still listened intently, interested to hear Inej’s experience. “She was nice. She said I am healthy.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” Alina told her, observing the chairs set in semicircle, a small table positioned in the center. Her husband was going for the image of a gracious host, Alina thought.

“It’s going to be fine,” Alina said to Inej when the other woman glanced towards the door - and in the next moment the door opened, and many people started pouring in. Aleksander walked in first, followed by Ivan, David and Jesper, then Kaz and Fedyor. Alina immediately felt the tension between the men as two thieves remained further away from the rest.

“What are you trying to do?” Kaz was seething at Aleksander the moment the door was closed. “I should have known -”

“You should know better to just assume, Mister Brekker,” Aleksander cut in sharply. “*Sit down*. You, *and* your friends. You can mistrust me all you want but some things are facts and you will have to face them, like it or not,” Aleksander said. There was something in his tone that made the younger man yield, and Kaz took one of the chairs waiting there. Jesper sat next to him, uncharacteristically still and serious. Everyone else, except for Aleksander, sat down as well.

“Fine then,” Kaz said, “Spare us all the necessity to *assume* and tell us what this little show was all about?”

“Your friend is a Grisha,” Aleksander said, pacing slowly. Inej gasped. Kaz tried to keep his face neutral, but the perpetual scowl on his features let on that he wasn’t fine at all. “And you were aware of this, Mister Fahey?”

Jesper was silent, only his expression seemed to harden under Aleksander’s gaze. He didn’t say anything.

“It’s alright, Mister Fahey. I understand. I understand better than you might think. To be a Grisha, and on your own, and have other people notice it... is still very dangerous. Someone taught you how to hide what you could do, and to use your ability just enough to keep you alive -”

“And how would *you* understand?” Kaz cut in, and Alina wondered if he was trying to protect his friend from the threat Aleksander seemed to be to them, or if his true motives were different. “You have a damn palace and an army to keep you safe -”

“There were times where there was no palace, Mister Brekker. No army and no safety, and not a place in the world where a Grisha was truly safe. And I’ve lived long enough to see it all. I know of people who kept themselves alive like your friend did, but if we have figured him out, other people could too. And other people might not be exactly Grisha friendly,” Aleksander supplied. Kaz scoffed.

“Don’t pretend you’re doing us a favor,” he said.

“I’m not, and you’re right. This is not a very good position for you, in fact -,” Aleksander paused behind the chair Alina was sitting on and set his hands on her shoulders. “Let’s remember how we all met. You have agreed to kidnap my wife and sell her, did you not? A *Grisha*. *Just like your friend*, Mister Brekker. Would you sell him, if someone wanted a Grisha who could shoot targets at impossible angles? Or is there honor among thieves after all?”

Kaz was silent. He wasn’t seething any more, or glaring at Aleksander like he wanted to murder him. Inej was looking at her hands.

“I should have said no,” she said then, looking up at Kaz.

”What?”

“You *know* what, Kaz. I should have never agreed. I -” she looked at Alina and quietly wiped her tears. “No. I don’t get to do this, here. We’ve done wrong,” she said. “We would have ruined your life, without a thought. What does that make us?” Inej paused, looking at Aleksander and

then back at Alina and the rest of the Grisha present, then finally addressed her friends. “*No*, Kaz, don’t look at me like that. You know... you *know* what I am talking about. We’re in their debt, just as I am.. was... in *yours*, and as far as I am concerned I will accept the offer. You... don’t have to,” she finished softly, threads of sadness lingering in her voice as she observed Kaz’s face. “Jes,” she paused again. “Did you know?”

Jesper shifted in his chair, looking around the room, and the people surrounding them. “Yeah, I knew,” he said. “But... we never called it... *that*. My mother, she -”

“She was a Grisha, wasn’t she?” Aleksander prodded and Inej held whatever she was going to say. Judging by her expression Alina thought it would be another apology.

“She could do the same as me. Well, not *exactly* the same, she didn’t shoot. She... she fixed my shoes and clothes. Nothing in our house was ever broken for long. Everyone just thought... that my parents were very handy and good at mending things.”

“She taught you how to use your gift without being noticed,” Aleksander said.

“She did,” Jesper said. “And told me never tell anyone. And... I didn’t,” he looked at Kaz.

“Well, that makes sense,” Aleksander said. “Sadly.”

“Damn it,” Kaz said.

“I’m sorry, boss. It’s -” Jesper seemed out of words, but Kaz certainly was not.

“Well *you* could have gotten hurt,” Kaz replied, his hold on his own emotions seemingly precarious, but now he didn’t seem angry as he was. He seemed upset in a significantly different way. “I hate to agree with... *him*, but he’s right,” he added, looking at Aleksander.

“It’s not that simple, Mister Brekker,” Aleksander said somewhat thoughtfully, moving away from Alina’s chair. “He’s hurting as we speak. Grisha who don’t use their abilities to full extent, regularly, they get sick. He’s sick. He’s wasting away, just... slowly.”

“What does that mean?” Kaz asked, still a frown on his face but the defensive posture gone. Alina thought she could hear fear beneath it all and she could clearly see that underneath the posturing and the facade, Kaz was still very young, and very much frightened. He had a specific way of dealing with the world that rightfully scared him; a world that posed danger to anyone except the precious few on top. Kaz was still looking at Aleksander, needing explanations. “He would just collapse one day?”

“Quite possible,” Aleksander said, pausing behind Jesper’s chair. His face seemed hard and eyes detached, but his tone of voice was not. “Or perhaps, he would get some trivial illness, or cut himself, or something that otherwise wouldn’t even touch him could happen and he’d die. And you wouldn’t know or understand what had happened to your friend.”

“So what do we do?” Kaz asked further.

“We’ll show him how to use what he has. How to be what he is,” Aleksander said.

“One of you?” Jesper asked, craning his neck so he could see Aleksander better.

“You *are* one of us, Mister Fahey,” Aleksander said calmly. “But I won’t force you into my Army, as I don’t think that would bring good to either of us. As far as I am concerned, to the rest of the world you will remain the sharpshooter that you were. However knowing what I do know now, I will make sure you know how to use your abilities, so you don’t die. Either upon discovery or due to the wasting sickness.”

“You don’t owe us that,” Inej said softly.

“He is Grisha, Miss Ghafa, and my job is to keep Grisha safe,” Aleksander replied. “You still have your choice. To either accept my offer or to leave Ravka and never return again. After what you’ve done, I think it’s a reasonable demand on my part.”

*

The late afternoon was deceptively calm and the weather was still too lovely to remain inside. Alina wanted to take a walk, but not by herself and with her own thoughts.

“I’ll return you to your duties shortly,” Alina promised to Aleksander as she pulled at his hand. “I really don’t want to be alone right now.”

“I understand,” he said, offering her his hand and falling in step with her. She was getting slower these days, and the more her stomach grew, the more she had to adjust. The boots she loved got uncomfortable very early on, and now it was too hot to wear them anyway. Genya made sure she had plenty of comfortable shoes and Alina had a suspicion that normally they would all be too big - however right now her feet were thankful.

“What do you think?” Alina asked when they were alone in the gardens - far from the Little palace and Grand Palace as well.

“I didn’t expect to crack Mister Brekker’s shell at all,” Aleksander said, thoughtful. “Yet here we are. He seems bent on protecting his friends, but he’s not going to admit it aloud. It would ruin his reputation.”

“Ah,” Alina smiled slightly. “Doesn’t that remind me of someone.”

Aleksander seemed to catch onto the amusement in her tone. "Does it?"

"Perhaps. I might know a scary General who visits children's classes and amuses them with shadow animals," she added, poking Aleksander's side lightly, enjoying the sound of his quiet laugh.

"He doesn't seem very frightening to me," he said, his fond look passing over her.

"What should we do about Jesper?" Alina asked. There wasn't much time and he couldn't go through comprehensive training like she had. Alina doubted Aleksander would trust his mother enough to train Jesper at all, but on the other hand, Jesper did seem to have a solid grasp on his powers.

"I have arranged with David to help him master his abilities. Mister Fahey seems to know *how* to use his powers, but in my estimation, he doesn't know how to use them to full extent," he said.

"Are you saying he's suppressing them?"

"In a way. I think he might have a subconscious hold in order not to let it out fully. And that had to be learned, and purposefully taught," Aleksander mused. "Which means he had a smart mother."

"She taught him the exact extent to use, to keep him alive, and out of suspicion?" Alina asked.

"Yes. That's what I think happened. I doubt we'll know for sure, I doubt even he remembers everything - what was that?"

"What?" Alina looked at Aleksander, catching his gaze and trying to determine what he was looking at. All around them were neatly arranged and kept trees and flowers, the grass trimmed short along the gravel pathway. There wasn't anyone here, well, not anyone that Alina managed to notice.

"That," Aleksander said, pointing slightly to the left. "Oh damn it."

Alina saw something white. Something large and... bird shaped.

"Is that a swan?"

Aleksander groaned. "That's one of Tatiana's swans. They're letting them wander around *again* -"

"Again?"

He sighed. "Last year she got them as a present. Six swans. Of course, the swans are not meant to be a decoration on her miniscule artificial lake behind the Grand Palace, and they're not supposed to be there to be looked at. They were all over the place. Each time one went missing entire search parties were launched -"

"Are you serious?" Alina asked.

"Well, what do you think?" he said and then, after several seconds he started walking resolutely towards the huge bird which seemed content to sit in the sun right next to lilies Alina planted early in the spring.

"Aleksander," Alina called, watching him as he approached the bird. "What exactly are you doing?"

"I have to catch the damn beast," he said. "It has no business here -"

"Uh, Aleksander," her voice faltered as she remembered many occasions when Ana Kuya tried to handle the geese she kept for a period of time. They were nasty, aggressive animals that would gang upon anyone who dared entering their space, launching a pretty vicious attack.

Alina didn't know much about swans but she feared such a kind of bird, not too different from a goose, and wild at that, could be only... worse.

Aleksander paused and turned around to face her.

"What is it, milaya?"

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? That's... a huge bird," she said, looking at him worriedly. He smiled in a way that made her think he was approaching the task too nonchalantly, with a confidence that wasn't completely warranted. "I'm not sure this is a very smart idea."

"Oh milaya. It's just a bird," he said and with that he resumed his path.

Alina remained in her spot, filled with a sense of dread. She observed how Aleksander slowed down, noticed the exact moment when the swan spotted him, and how it raised its wings, feathers ruffled when Aleksander came very close. That couldn't be good, she thought, inching closer just a bit to see better what was going on. At that point Aleksander had approached the animal, crouching and reaching with his hand, and Alina wondered if he was truly planning to catch a grown swan with his bare hands?

"Aleksander," she said, worried.

"Shh, love. I've got it. Don't -"

Before he could get the words out the bird lurched forward, its mighty wings spread. Aleksander tried to rise to his full height and pull back, but the swan caught the material of his trousers in its beak, dangerously close to his crotch. She heard Aleksander curse, stepping back immediately in a large stride, however the bird remained attached to his trousers.

“Saints alive! It won’t let me go,” he said, grabbing the swan by its neck. The bird in turn started flapping its wings, literally hitting him as he tried to drag himself away and pull the bird’s head from his pants, but to no avail.

Realizing that he was not in any true danger, and that he most probably was trying not to hurt the bird, Alina watched the surreal sparring match going on in front of her eyes - a furious bird kicking the Darkling General, the Lord of all Grisha with its wings while doing its best to rip his pants, and Aleksander at its complete mercy - or the lack of it.

“I told you it wasn’t smart,” Alina said, “I can’t believe you just did that! Aleksander -” she started but all of it was too ridiculous, too incredulous and she started laughing.

Her husband shot her a hurt look.

“I just... wanted to... catch the damn bird! I could have cut it in half,” he was panting, pulling at the bird’s neck and trying to dodge its wings.

“And start a coup?” Alina laughed.

“It would certainly be *worth it*,” Aleksander nearly growled. “Let me go, you damn beast!”

It all continued for a while longer, Aleksander cursing and Alina watching, wondering what to do - trying to catch the bird and pull it away would be too risky, and she wasn’t her most graceful self in her state. She wasn’t keen on just letting it go on, because the bird *was* big - she feared the bird would knock him down and go for his face or neck. That was a much more frightening prospect than having his pants torn in a very unflattering spot. The only thing Alina could think of was scaring the bird away - she summoned, an orb of light that wasn’t too big but it was blinding in its brightness, and keeping it between her hands she advanced towards Aleksander and the swan.

It had worked - when she came close, the swan got scared just as she hoped - and it flew away.

“Not a moment too soon, my dear wife,” Aleksander huffed, sitting on the ground.

“Are your pants in one piece?”

“My *pants* ? What about *me* ?”

Alina giggled sweetly, coming closer to inspect the damage. His hair was in complete disarray and aside from that, and severely bruised pride, she supposed, he seemed to be just fine.

“You are a silly man, despite being a General and the most feared man in Ravka,” she said. “How ever did you think that approaching a swan was a good idea?”

“It’s a *bird*,” Aleksander complained.

“And birds are nasty creatures, especially birds like that -”

His eyebrows shot up and the look of almost betrayal on his face was literally comical. “Birds like that? What do you mean? Did you know -”

“Oh, hush,” she said, offering him her hand to help him stand up. He accepted, and with a groan he rose, dusting himself off. “Ana Kuya, the woman who ran the orphanage at Keramzin had geese. And they were *terrible*,” she said.

“What do you mean, terrible?”

“Have you ever had a flock of geese bite your ankles?” Alina asked.

“Don’t tell me you -”

“Oh not me. Mal did. Despite Ana Kuya’s warning,” Alina said. “Well, you two have one thing in common, it seems.”

“Do I want to know?” he asked.

“You’re both stubborn idiots,” Alina laughed, standing in front of him, to inspect him in more detail. “It seems you’re unharmed. Count yourself lucky - Mal had terrible bruises after his epic fight with the geese.”

“Well, if you say so - the bird flew away, though,” Aleksander said. “Tsaritsa will have a true royal fit when she hears it.”

“Alina grinned. “Let her. Somehow my sympathy is failing in this very situation.”

“How about your sympathy for me?” Aleksander asked. “I could have been badly bruised after all. I think I deserve some kind of ...”

“Comfort treatment?” Alina offered, smiling cheekily at him and pulling him closer. “I am sure your pride took quite a hit,” she said, grinning up at him. “How does a cake sound? And then a bath afterwards?”

Aleksander pulled her right hand to his lips, giving her knuckles a warm, lingering kiss.

“It’s certainly a very tempting offer, my sweet,” he said. “I accept.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun story time! The swan attack is based on a true story - a swan attacked my husband who came too close to one of those birds in an attempt to pet it (stupid man). It all went down pretty much the same way I described here, only the swan let go of his joggers (unharmed. Though I suppose his pride was bruised because that bird handed him his ass.) Anyway, I hope that last bit made you laugh.

Swans are really, truly nasty and aggressive and please never try to pet them or come too close to them. They *will* attack you. They're truly the biggest bullies of bird kingdom :P

So, can you guess who among our characters will laugh the most about the swan story? (because there's no way Alina is keeping that to herself :P)

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

After an unexpected visit and a conversation, it seems there is one thing less for Alina to worry about - or maybe not.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. Yes, you're not dreaming - here's a new chapter. I am so sorry for leaving this story on wait for so long - my life has been stressful and I've been facing health problems that have drained my energy to write, and I failed to commit myself to my stories the way I wanted to. I will do my best to establish a regular posting schedule again, because I truly wish to finish this story.

To anyone who is still reading this - thank you, and please be so kind and leave a comment. It truly means more than I can say, and I've been needing good things lately. :)

A knock on her door was firm and unfamiliar - not the light knocking she associated with Fedyor or rapid knocks that belonged to Ivan. Alina rubbed her eyes and pushed herself up from her armchair, putting the book she was reading aside. When she opened the door to her rooms, she recognized the guard that Aleksander had assigned to their visitors - next to him stood Kaz Brekker, dressed in an unremarkable uniform of the Palace staff, seemingly not too thrilled about it. The hallway was empty, but if their guests were to pass as members of the staff, the guards would have to be less obvious.

"Mister Brekker," Alina greeted.

"I fear I'm not sure how to properly address you now," he said when she offered him to enter. His limp was somewhat less noticeable, and he seemed uncomfortable, walking without his cane - but that thing was also a weapon and Aleksander was reluctant to have an armed Kaz Brekker under the same roof as everyone else. Alina made a mental note to order a plain wooden walking cane for him - no matter how dangerous, and he definitely was, Alina didn't want him to walk around without the support he needed.

"I am still Alina," she told him as she gestured towards the table near the window. "For the purposes of the Palace, I am Lady Kirigan," she added.

"Makes sense," he said practically, taking a seat and observing Alina as she moved, his eyes obviously stuck at her stomach, a suspicious scowl briefly fixed on his face. "And I assume you're well and don't wish to leave any longer -?"

Alina opened and closed her mouth as Kaz obviously fidgeted in his seat.

"What are you asking me?"

He pressed his lips into a thin line. "Look. You've caught us and suddenly Jesper is Grisha? And just coincidentally, that husband of yours whom you were trying to kill just a couple of months ago *owns* the Grisha -"

"My husband doesn't own the Grisha, Kaz," Alina did her best to sound calm. "The Tsar does."

"*Of course*," Kaz said, not sounding convinced at all.

"Tell me, then, why was Jesper hiding what he is? Our entire known world thinks we are witches or abominations, or something to be sold -"

"Point taken," Kaz said, visibly deflating. Alina sighed. oh how much easier was to assign blame at someone you could reach, or punch, than to recognize the width and the scope of the problem.

"Are you worried that Aleksander will enlist Jesper into the Second Army?"

After several moments of silence, Kaz relented. "Yes. And I wonder, what he's goign to do with a cripple criminal and a former slave."

"It would be a high hypocrisy if we, barely considered people, would put you all in a position you seem to expect of us," Alina said.

"Forgive me, Sun Summoner," Kaz said, "Your husband is a man with a certain reputation."

"And you are as well, aren't you? Calculating and merciless. Yet here you are, obviously caring about your friend."

When he didn't say anything Alina continued, doing her best to sound amiable and honest. "Nobody wants to enlist your friend into the Army," she said.

"How can you be so certain?"

"Think practically. What good would that do? There are dozens of trained Grisha already serving in the Second Army. What do we get if we enlist your friend, who first and foremost needs help to master his own powers? How does that help with anything?"

"That..." Kaz paused thoughtfully, "That makes sense."

"But we do need to find out what is going on in the Monseno region."

"Why us?" Kaz asked, and that was when Alina paused, not sure what to tell him.

"Well. You did prove yourselves when you broke into this Palace, did you not?"

He didn't answer, probably knowing that was his capital sin, along with taking Alina with them, that Aleksander was not willing to let go of. A smart man, Alina thought, much like her husband; hellbent to survive in the world that would enjoy crushing him. How ironic, she thought, for him and Aleksander to be almost enemies.

"A decision I am coming to regret," Kaz said, but his frown seemed more like a mask than genuine dislike.

"You're a man with means and capabilities, and we need someone like that. You and your friends," Alina told him, as earnestly as possible. When he did not move and didn't say a word Alina shifted in her seat, not sure if her discomfort was from her sore back or the fact that this plan, that was her idea, might as well fall apart right into her face. "My husband might be into schemes and games, but I am not. There are people scheming against him, wanting to remove him from his position and possibly kill him, and after that the Grisha are free game. Or that's at least what the people who want him dead expect."

"Him," Kaz pointed out.

"Him, but after that me, this child," Alina placed a hand on her stomach and Kaz flinched. For someone who had no problems with committing violence or killing, the idea of a child being killed seemed to trigger something. "And not just this child. Every single child living in this palace, that we have managed to keep safe so far."

"The children stolen by the Black General?" Kaz supplied, but his sneer was gone. If anything he seemed distressed by the things Alina was saying.

"Oh please," she sighed, exasperated and tired of the constant need to deflect, to look for another angle, a twist, a manipulation. "I think you're too smart of a man to truly believe that old wives tale," she said, letting her anger and frustration show. "Did you not hear the stories of children being thrown out because they're Grisha? Or taken by the Fjerdans, or ...sold to Shu Han? You did, didn't you, you were going to sell *me*, after all," she said and he sucked in a deep breath. Alina didn't pause. "If I can move past that, and my husband as well, then perhaps you can look at the bigger picture. And consider the generous amount of money my husband is willing to pay -"

"You actually care for him," Kaz said suddenly, his face strange. Alina thought of Aleksander, the way he reined in his anger when he had to.

"I do," she told him. "For as little as that might mean to you -"

"No," he said. "People who care are dangerous," he said, his face distant, but not openly rejecting any more.

"Dangerous," Alina repeated, prompting him to continue. After a beat he did.

"They're willing to commit themselves more... more than money might pay -"

"Like Inej might?"

He flinched like a disgruntled cat. Obviously he didn't enjoy having his weaknesses picked apart, which was fair - Alina did not as well.

"I do care about him. About the people here, but also, about the people of Ravka," she told him.

"A true saint then," Kaz said, his eyes quietly measuring her conviction. "No wonder Inej believes in you."

"Not a saint," Alina told him. "Just tired of unfairness and suffering. So I was willing to find you and get your help, by any means necessary. Or almost any."

A smile played over Kaz's face - not a warm one, but also, not an unkind one. "Like I said, Alina, Lady Kirigan - people who care are dangerous. That's something I can respect."

*

The conversation left her unsteady, even if it ended on good terms, and Alina found herself in the kitchens long after everyone had left it - the dinner was served and eaten, the kitchen clean and empty, save for cheerful little fire in the hearth. Alina wasn't hungry, but she wanted something - the walnut roll had no appeal. Perhaps she could make some tea, the way Aleksander liked to, and put some berry jam in it, despite finding it ridiculous; but once she does, it just doesn't taste the same. She drinks it anyway, eats a slice of the cake and leaves, opting to read in bed and hoping Aleksander would return soon.

She fell asleep before he returned, with a book on her chest, and woke up when he tried to remove it from there. Alina shifted, rubbed her eyes, taking in the sight of him, half ready for bed.

"That was a long meeting," she said as he kissed her forehead.

"Yes. But you fell asleep early," he said, one hand covering her stomach. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Alina pushed the discontent thoughts about Kaz Brekker far away. "Just usually pregnancy problems with wanting certain food."

"Oh?"

She sighed, trying to shift so he could sit next to her and proceed to divest himself.

"I wanted your tea. With the jam. And I made it but it wasn't the same,"

"Oh, I see. Do you want -?"

"No, it's fine," Alina stretched and rubbed her eyes. As much as she enjoyed his doting, she wanted him to get his rest. "You can make me some in the morning. I much prefer you right here," she watched as he gave her an amused and tender smile, finished undressing and put on a fresh nightshirt before he pulled the covers down to settle next to her. Alina shifted to the side, carefully settling so that her new weight could rest comfortably. Just a couple of months ago she was doubting herself, right here in this bed, as she stared into his eyes and wondered if she saw just false promises in them. Now she could feel their child move inside her womb.

"Well, here I am," he told her, sighing, and she could see how tired he was; how he slowly relaxed, how his face became less sharp. She was about to fall asleep but before she did, she wanted to share what had been troubling her through her afternoon.

"I talked to Kaz Brekker today," she said, surprised with his answer.

"I know."

"You do?"

Aleksander nodded.

"He and his friends came to me not a half an hour ago, to tell me they accept my offer," he said.

"Wait...what? Are you serious?" she asked and he nodded.

"Looks like you convinced him, Alina. Not that I intend to let my guard down at all, but, whatever you told him... it seems that a man of stone has a heart after all."

"You're aware that people say exactly the same thing about you?"

He laughed, his hand gently cupping the side of her face. "Yes, I am. And that's fine, for the most part. But... speaking of people ... would you like to visit the farmer's market tomorrow?"

"Really? Of course I would," she said, closing her eyes against his caress. "What brought this on?"

"Oleg mentioned summer berries earlier this week, and I thought... perhaps you would enjoy the fresh ones?"

She smiled, feeling somewhat sad and thinking of many times she saw the berries on Keramzin market, but only in passing - they were never purchased for the orphanage, because the children were too many and the berries too costly, and thus, Alina never tried one.

"What is it?" he asked, undoubtedly seeing the shift in her mood.

"That will be my first time eating those berries," she told him.

"Are you - wait, you never tried summer berries?" she shook her head and shrugged as he watched her incredulously.

"Orphanage. Too many of us were better fed with apples and sometimes plums. And that was about it."

"But that's - that's outrageous! Couldn't they just plant a bush of berries? it's not like they require high maintenance -"

"Ana Kuya did not have time for," things like that. To think what could please us, when she had to clothe and feed us," Alina said.

"In other words, she was just mean to you all," Aleksander concluded.

"I was being sarcastic."

"For Saint's sake," he said. "That woman sounds like a monster."

"Well she could easily compete with, ahem. Your mother," Alina said, trying to make it sound like a joke, but once she thought of it, she couldn't unsee it - the harshness, the cold, with no affection whatsoever; that was what both women were like to her at least.

"Oh my darling," Aleksander kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you -"

He shook his head and gently traced her cheek. "My mother is, sadly, terrible. You don't have to pretend otherwise just to humor me."

"I know. I wish... she wasn't like that. I wish you had hugs and safety and -," she sighed. "Everything a child needs. Everything we both didn't have."

"I wish too, I wish you had it," he told her, his forehead against hers. "We cannot change what has been. But what we can do... have a better here-and-now and make sure this little one has everything we both lacked," he said, resting his hand lightly on her stomach. "I think we can do that," he added.

"He will have first summer berries, then," Alina said.

"He? What if it's a she?"

"You want to have a daughter?" Alina asked lightly, warm from her head to her toes as his hand rubbed her bump.

"I don't think I have a preference. I truly don't know. I think... I wish this child to be safe and healthy and happy. That, that is what I wish," he told her, a soft and precious secret confessed, only for her ears to hear. She thought about how nobody else got to see him like this, relaxed and happy, thoughtful and caring. "You know, I have an idea," he said after a short, quiet lull in their conversation, when she was starting to doze off.

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Would you like to plant some berry bushes with me?"

*

The summer had reached the point when the weather was so warm, that wearing a standard kefta was a nearly impossible task.

"These are designed to allow you to feel comfortable," Aleksander explained as she pulled on a considerably lighter garment - still protective corecloth, carefully shielding her stomach, but not as restricting and heavy as the keftas she was used to. The Palace was as safe as a place in Ravka could be, and she enjoyed her walks outside wearing simple and practical dresses. Going to the capital meant both she and Aleksander had to make an impression, and the message of fear was never a good one. A saint of the people was not supposed to be afraid of those people - even if most of the saints had met their end at the hands of those who later worshiped them. "It still shows who you are, and keeps you safe" Aleksander said as Alina buttoned a dress like an overcoat, wearing only an airy, thin cotton dress underneath. His own clothes were modified, and the light kefta hugged his shoulders closely, making him look distinguished, but still more relaxed than he did in his General of the Second Army attire.

"With you, Fedyor and Ivan with me I cannot be not-safe," she told him, affectionately fixing his collar. "How are we... how should I act in public?"

"The way you feel," Aleksander said, his tone almost indulgent. "I know the plan is to appear close and accessible to people... but I don't want you to pretend to be comfortable with something you're not," he moved an errand strand of her hair behind her ear. Alina had asked Genya to give her a simple hairdo for the day, not too strict and overdone, but still appropriate for a woman who was married.

"Well then," she gave him an excited smile, realizing that she was looking forward to this. Whenever she had the chance to go to Keramzin market on a market day, it was a small feat, even if she could never get beffies or warm pastries, or deliciously looking candy. "I am ready to go."

The carriage ride was cheerful, and even Ivan seemed pleased, despite Alina and Fedyor's constant chatting. Their plan was fairly simple - stop the carriage just outside the center of the capital, so that Alina and Aleksander could stroll the streets leading to the market. It was still fairly early in the morning and the air was balmy and warm.

They drew attention the moment they stepped out of the carriage - Alina could see people stopping to observe them, many of them touching their foreheads and making the sign of the saints. And even though she experienced it before, it was nearly overwhelming.

"It's alright," Aleksander told her as they passed, awed, reverent faces. She nodded, trying to reconcile her emotions - living among the grisha in a space that was mostly sheltered had been easy. Dealing with the noble folk and court members was something else, and Alina found the way to detach her true self while doing it - it was not unlike a game of chess, or poker played with cards, something that Aleksander enjoyed, but she failed to keep a straight face whenever they attempted to play.

But this, this felt different. Alina held her husband's hand, his long fingers safely twined with hers, feeling like she was looking at a mirror; not seeing herself but what so many people wanted her to be - a sign of home, a proof that they could, some day, have a better life. That at the end of the misery there lay a salvation. With the feeling of responsibility weighing over her she wondered if that was how Aleksander felt among the Grisha, and how many times did his own kind think him a failure. Someone who failed to bring the better life everyone was hoping for.

He had to sense how she was feeling, and despite being in the street and seen by so many, he pulled her hand to his lips and tenderly kissed the back of her hand.

"You may be a sun saint, but you're not their savior yet," he whispered. "Today, you are just my wife," he said, his tone reminding her of the way he encouraged her at the time of her Winter fete presentation. It made sense, she thought - this was a presentation on its own, that would show them as not just powerful Grisha, or leaders, or even saints, but simply a loving couple.

Aleksnader stopped at a store that had Kerch chocolates and spent a small fortune indulging both Alina's curiosity and his own sweet tooth. He bought Alina a bouquet of flowers from a flower girl who couldn't be more than ten years of age, overpaying her and even giving her a smile;

wanted to indulge his wife further with a pretty fabric for a new dress, but Alina insisted not to - not only did she feel out of place at a shop with fine silks and lace, not long ago just an orphan girl who had a tattered coat and boots one size too big and always cold. There was also a promise of summer berries that awaited her not long ahead, and thus they continued towards the market, Alina's hand safe in the crook of Aleksander's arm, and her face half hidden by the colorful flowers he got her.

And then, there was a market - colorful and bustling with people, with fruit and vegetables and freshly baked bread, goat milk and homemade cheese. More flowers, more smiling, reverent faces that looked at them in disbelief.

She wanted a little bit of everything. She wanted to give her smile, her attention to everyone and the three men in her company obliged her as she picked out what she wanted to buy, unsure how exactly to bless the women with hands rough from work as they asked for her blessings.

"A true honor, to have you here, moya Sankta," one woman told her, "a true blessing to see your face."

It was what she thought about as they sat back inside the carriage, Alina contently leaning against Aleksander, safely tucked under his arm, tasting the strawberries and raspberries with Fedyor.

"Are you tired?" Aleksander asked, as the carriage rocking almost made her fall asleep.

"Yes," she said, "but so not sorry for it."

"Then I am glad," he told her. "Would you like Oleg to use these for a cake?" he gestured towards the baskets sitting at the floor of the carriage.

"I think that would be splendid," she said, thinking of the people she met today. Thinking about how they should do this more often. How being Sankta Alina, whom people prayed to, should mean something more than hand-waved blessings and pretty smiles she offered to the women at the market.

By the time they returned to the Little Palace Alina was ready to go and take a nap, willing to let Aleksander, or anyone else actually, wake her up when the lunch was ready. But a late morning nap was not bound to happen - the moment they entered the Palace, Alina could sense something was wrong. On the outside everything looked perfectly normal - but once they set their feet inside the Palace, Alina was aware that *something* had happened, even if the staff that passed seemed blissfully ignorant.

There were four guards at the bottom of the main staircase, their eyes pointed at Aleksander.

"Stay with Fedyor," Aleksander said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze before he and Ivan started to climb the staircase. Alina watched them until they turned a corner.

"Let's get these to the kitchen, shall we?" Fedyor suggested, and Alina reluctantly agreed, deciding it was best to act as if nothing was amiss.

She would find out soon enough what was going on.

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

In which stuff happens. There's some angst, some betrayal, there are a few conversations and Alina makes some interesting moves.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! I am alive - still struggling with personal life, still going through several exhausting things, but for one, I wish to write more this year, and I properly kick it off, I did my best to finish this chapter. A huge thank you to [aloveforjaneausten](#) on tumblr who helped me write myself out of the corner and get back on track. I hope this new chapter is satisfying and here's to the New Year! May it be good and kind to you all, and my your dearest wishes come true.

Come and say hi, in comments or on tumblr!

"That doesn't bode well," Fedyor muttered when two guards appeared on the top of the staircase, heading straight towards them. Alina gave the last instructions to a maid who took the baskets they brought from the market, realizing she was bound to forget about them - for some time at least.

"The General calls for you both," one of the guards said. Alina shared a brief glance with Fedyor and followed him up the stairs, ignoring the way her body started to protest. Something was wrong and she felt she couldn't get to Aleksander's rooms soon enough. There were four guards in front of the War Room, a sight which she had never seen, and for a moment she thought someone had to be hurt. Fedyor looked at her, undoubtedly sensing her panic. He raised a hand and she could feel the calm wash over her - a calm which she did not want, in case someone truly was hurt.

"I am right here," Fedyor said softly then, just before he pushed the door open.

Inside, nothing seemed amiss at first. Alina's eyes sought Aleksander out - he was fine, aside from his obviously upset mood. But then she saw the other people in as well - Ivan, Baghra, a tall, broad shouldered blond-haired man, who was sitting on a chair with his hands tied up behind his back, and a red haired woman whose hands were tied *apart*.

"Oh," Alina whispered before she could get ahold of herself. The woman raised her chin in something that only seemed like defiance - her eyes went between Aleksander and Baghra to Alina herself, widening for a fraction of a moment before she was able to school her features.

Alina noticed fractions of the scene - the distinct look of the unknown, tied up man, the fact that the red haired woman was a Grisha, the way Baghra was standing between them, obviously upset and angry.

"Oh thank Saints," the old woman said then, her gaze set on Alina.

"Did you think I somehow wouldn't protect my wife?" Aleksander snapped and Baghra scoffed.

"You obviously don't have much success keeping spies away from your property, boy," Baghra replied. "Or keeping them faithful to yourself, it seems -"

"You don't *know* anything -" the red haired woman started but Aleksander gave her an icy, cutting look.

"I would choose my words *very* wisely, Miss Zenik," Aleksander said.

Zenik, Alina thought.

"You're Nina?" Alina asked, not wanting to wait for her own turn to speak. In her experience, this argument would have just continued, while she'd have to grasp at pieces of information thrown around.

She arched an eyebrow at Alina, not nearly as friendly as Genya used to describe her.

"I am warning you, Miss Zenik -" Aleksander said.

"You're assuming you know the truth. You're assuming you know anything about why I am here," Nina replied through gritted teeth.

"You bringing a Fjerdan along - and not just any Fjerdan but highly skilled Druskelle right here makes for a very loud statement. So tell me please, how am I wrong?"

"I did not bring him here to harm anyone," Nina replied, at which most people in the room just scoffed. Aleksander was unmoved, his eyes cold, and it took Alina a moment until she realized what he was feeling - betrayal.

"Then why did you bring him?" Alina asked, stepping close to Aleksander in a vain attempt to soothe him.

Nina hesitated.

"Well, Miss Zenik?" Aleksander prompted, moving so that his body was shielding Alina. Strangely, Baghra walked around to stand on her other side, not quite near but not too far away either, despite the fact that Nina had no way to harm anyone.

"You took our friends," Nina finally said.

"Your... *friends*," Aleksander said slowly, seemingly confused.

"The people you had kidnapped from a tavern," finally, the man who was silent up to now said. "What? I don't care if you kill me, Darkling. I'm not in the habit of being scared," he said. "I didn't come here to kill anyone, much less her," he inclined his head towards Alina, nothing in this voice but exhaustion. "Those people did help me, though -"

Aleksander barked a half laugh, a bitter, ironic sound that seemed to startle everyone, Baghra included. "Oh I am sorry - there is a certain irony in this. You brought a Fjerdan to free the people who tried to sell the Sun Summoner, not to capture and kill Grisha. It is -"

But Nina frowned, sad and angry and frustrated. Alina realized that shame flashed across her face, replaced by something infinitely more cold very, very quickly.

"This is not a good way to deal with this situation," Baghra said then. Aleksander looked at her, a son willing to hear out his much older mother.

"I think so too," he agreed. "Ivan, take them away and make sure they're safely locked. Miss Zenik in particular," Aleksander said.

"So you'll throw us in the dungeons?" Nina protested.

"No, not dungeons," Aleksander said. "Despite your actions, I do not intend to live up to the imagined monster you may think I am -"

"And Matthias?"

"He will not be too far from you," Aleksander said. "Ivan, you may take them away."

*

The door closed behind Ivan and Fedya, as they took their prisoners away, but Baghra remained rooted where she was. Her closed off expression changed after only three of them were left inside the War Room.

"Sloppy is not something I expected you to become, boy," she addressed Aleksander, and Alina could easily see how he fumed at her words; and perhaps she was even right. Alina did not know much about Nina, but what she gathered from several mentions was that Nina was a spy. It did not bode well if she truly switched allegiances, as Aleksander seemed to believe, and slipping into the Little Palace unnoticed, with a Fjerdan in tow no less, was alarming.

"I am *not* sloppy," he countered momentarily. Baghra sighed in an exasperated fashion of someone who was tired of having arguments with him.

"Well you certainly trusted the wrong person," she said, oddly without reprimand even though her tone was still sharp. Her eyes fell to Alina again, before she shifted her gaze back to her son. "You're not alone any more -"

"Do I hear *worry* in your voice, mother?" he asked and Baghra just rolled her eyes, continuing to stare at him as if he were a silly boy in need of a reprimand. "Did you suddenly find that you care about me?"

"I always cared about you," she said, at which Aleksander's face twisted. ". Alina felt like she walked on a long-going, enduring family fight that never got to be resolved.

"You certainly had great ways of showing it," Aleksander replied, starting to pace the room. The shadows in the corners shifted and Alina looked at Baghra.

"Oh just ignore it, girl. He's just doing it for drama," she said at which Aleksander glared at her and then sighed, when she simply arched an eyebrow at him. "You know I am right," Baghra pressed, stubbornly holding her ground, and if Alina was honest, the mulish way she talked to her son, reminded her of said son precisely.

Aleksander for his part deflated and went to stand at the War table, hands braced against the polished surface.

"You trained Nina," he said, giving Baghra a pointed look.

"So I did," she said. "But I never taught her it was fine to resign her post or join forces with an enemy. Or do you think I did?"

He looked up at Baghra, tired and hurt.

"You told Alina to leave. To run away. You sent her to danger," he said, his hurt barely contained. Baghra swallowed but remained where she was standing.

"And were you right to do what you did? Did you not deceive Alina, whom you claim to love?"

"I do love her, mother. You knew that, you used her against me precisely -"

"No. I would not let you use her, whether you loved her or not. That much worse, if you love her, as you claim, and don't treat her with truthfulness," Baghra said.

Alina walked to Aleksander then, feeling the tension spread from him with each breath.

"I know he does love me," Alina told Baghra, positioning herself between her and her son. "And we have dealt with the past. I would prefer it if we let it remain in the past."

Baghra's eyes followed Alina's movements as she placed a hand on her round stomach.

"I came here to alert you both of potential risks and danger," Baghra said, "not to continue our previous conflict. I can see that you have made your choice, girl," she paused heavily, her gaze locked with Alina's. "Now you have to protect that choice."

"So I will," Alina said, not truly certain what she was feeling.

"I am glad," Baghra replied, and with that she was gone.

*

Everyone left but the heaviness remained behind them, leaving Alina reeling with the revelations and questions. With everyone gone Aleksander seemed to crumble under his worry and his anger, and as his shoulders slumped, his eyes burned with fury. Alina had seen him like this, the barely contained anger and hurt spreading off of him in waves - and she remembered *precisely* when it had happened.

"Aleksander -" she started to speak, but he lifted a hand.

"I... I need a moment to myself. Please," he said. The way he turned, the way he shielded his hurt from her made her chest ache. She wanted to take him in her arms and ease everything weighing on him now, but she felt like there was a clear and distinct line, an invisible wall that she could not cross. With a heavy heart Alina nodded, retreating to the bedroom to undress and change into something more comfortable, just as she intended to as they were traveling back from the capital.

An amorphous fear bloomed within her - a worrying thought that the pain Aleksander felt, the pain she could not share, would somehow take him away from her.

*

Alina fell asleep although she did not intend to, and when she woke up, it was nearly evening. Her stomach protested quite loudly, her limbs all ached, for finding a comfortable position to sleep in was becoming progressively more difficult.

Her mood did not lift; not when she pulled on a fresh dress to make her way to the kitchens, even less when she found all the rooms empty and quiet, and curtains pulled together. She did not know if Aleksander wanted her to rest undisturbed or if he wanted to be somewhere all by himself, or both - in any case he was not there and the space around her, filled with his books, his papers, his belongings and his scent reminded her of the sharp refusal to the comfort she offered him.

Alina could deal with his temper - could handle the anger or impatience; but this? This was new, this pain that he seemed to cocoon himself within. She left their rooms, going to the kitchens where she would certainly find as much food as her heart desired, but in all honesty, she was looking for him. He certainly was not there.

Discontent, Alina had her lunch, willed herself to try the cake and wished Aleksander was there, just to tell him that berries made it all the better. She went to the library and spent some time reading, went to fetch herself the evening tea and some dinner - and then finally, when she returned to their rooms, her husband was present in body, if not with his mind, still distracted by his worries.

It was so uncharacteristic and it pained her so much that she did not manage to keep her thoughts to herself.

"Please stop," she said. Her voice quivered in the way she did not anticipate and he looked up, almost startled.

"Alina?"

"This silence is making me nervous," she told him. "I am not accustomed to you not.... not sharing what bothers you," she told him. He seemed to swallow tightly, then averted his eyes. "Sasha?"

"Okay, fine," he said, sighed as if the weight of it was immense and nearly unbearable.

Alina sat heavily on the duvet, observing the familiar room and beloved contours of his face. The tension left him in slow increments, fell away until only heaviness remained. He pulled up a heavy chair and collapsed in it, then sighed and kept quiet before he started speaking.

"Nina is... was one of my most trusted spies," he said simply, no interlude or explanation. At this point Alina knew what that meant - the effort and the pain of keeping a semblance of safety for Grisha together, while navigating the unpredictable, thorny politics of the court and waging two wars, while constantly expecting a stab in the back from your own. A good and trusted spy was not only essential, it was a person who could make all this hard work collapse into nothingness; or be the pair of eyes in the darkness. "The last person to do ...," he seemed lost for words.

"Turn her back on you?" Alina offered. Aleksander seemed to think about it carefully.

"No, it's not... it's not me, Alina. It's *everyone*," he said. She heard that tone before, that nearly desperate plea hidden in his voice - she heard it when he told her what happened to Luda, and why he created the Fold. Alina leaned forward, towards him, so she could grasp his hands in hers. "Nina knows what is at stake. She knows why we're enduring this entire charade. She had her specific tasks, she had....," he sighed, shaking his head. He leaned close too, so that his knees were touching hers as they sat in the silence and near darkness. Alina stroked the back of his hand with her thumb, the one where the round scar lay. "I just can't understand -" he broke off and Alina nodded. He wouldn't speak it aloud but it was heavily implied by everything she had witnessed prior - Nina and the Fjerdan were lovers.

How could she love an enemy - and not just any enemy? How could she abandon her calling for a man like that?

"Did you ask her?" Alina asked him quietly and he just shook his head, bowed it close to hers so his hair fell to her forehead.

"I should. I need to - to understand. I need to talk to her," he said. Alina stilled her thumb.

"Would you let me talk to her?"

Aleksander looked up, a small frown forming.

"I would like to," Alina said, moving her hand to fix the hair that was falling over his face. "I might have an idea or two."

"Oh?"

"Well, certainly," she told him, kissing his forehead warmly. It seemed like his tension was melting away under her touch. It felt only fair to keep distracting him as thoroughly as possible, for Alina did not wish to see him miserable and alone. "But let me talk to her first, and then I'll tell you if what I'm thinking about makes any sense at all. In the meantime -," she stood, so he had to look up at her, and she pulled at his hands until he was standing too. "Come with me?"

"Where?" he asked.

"To bed," Alina smiled. "I do not wish to be apart from you any longer, and I need to get comfortable. It was so terribly hot today."

Judging by Aleksander's smile, the way it stretched, content and enticing, he perfectly understood what she was offering.

"Well. What kind of a husband would I be, if I left my wife unsatisfied and lonely?"

*

The morning came, bright and warm, promising a day better than the previous one, but Alina was grim and worried and with only one goal in mind - a conversation with Nina.

"She is smart, witty and not always nice," Genya said as she braided Alina's hair.

"Not always nice?" Alina's eyebrows rose as she studied Genya's expression in the mirror. It was warm and fond, and mostly relaxed.

"She knows how to put people in their place, in the most enjoyable way," Genya explained, pausing slightly. "You would like it."

"Why would she associate herself with a Fjerdan then?" Alina asked further, watching as her friend worked. "She must be aware -"

Genya paused again, lifting her eyes to meet Alina's in the mirror. She shrugged slowly, her face carefully composed, worried and confused, but there was something else there too. Something much more vulnerable, and quite uncommon to see on Genya's face. "Genya?"

"It's.... I can't explain it to myself. And... I think I feel angry too, and I can't comprehend it," she said, fixing Alina's hair carefully. "It's.... I feel..."

"You feel betrayed," Alina said, remembering Aleksander's emptiness from yesterday.

"I... yes. I guess I do. It's the unthinkable -"

Unthinkable, Alina thought. Exactly what she thought and felt, after Baghra told her who Aleksander truly was.

"Well. Don't we want to hear her side of the tale?" Alina asked, looking at her friend. Genya seemed hesitant, clasping her hands in front of herself, but in the next moment she schooled her features.

"Of course," Genya said, but her voice sounded unsure to Alina's ears.

"She is a heartreuder," Fedyor was saying not long after as he and Ivan accompanied Alina to Nina's rooms, in the far end of the Palace's wing where officers lived. "She can -"

"I know what she can do," Alina told him, stopping in the middle of the hallway to look at both of the men accompanying her. She wasn't certain which one looked worse. "Think logically. How likely is it, that either she or her new friend would get out alive, if she harmed me?"

"None," Ivan said, his face grim.

"You brought her to the Palace as a child," Fedyor said, looking at Ivan with concern.

"And I'd kill her in a heartbeat if she harmed the Sun Summoner," Ivan said. "Or her child."

Alina shivered. She could feel the fluttery movements inside her belly, the joyous reminder of the new life growing under her heart, realizing that with one wave of the hand it could all be gone.

"We can keep her hands apart," Fedyor said. "It's demeaning but it would keep you safe, and frankly, I am less concerned about anyone's feelings when compared to your safety; and I am including myself in this."

Alina looked at him, then at Ivan who looked somewhat more relieved. Finally, it was the least intrusive way of making certain Nina wouldn't harm her - or anyone for that matter.

"Fine," she said, remembering gravely her own hands being tied apart, being cut off from her power; remembering again things that Aleksander told her. That sometimes ugly decisions just had to be made. "Tie her hands. Then, I will talk to her."

*

The woman in front of Alina looked nothing like the defiant, loud person she met briefly the day before. She looked distraught and tired, and above all sad after Fedyor secured her hands apart.

"We will, Moya Soveleave you to talk to her, Moya Soverenyia," he said to Alina. "Don't do anything you will regret," he said to Nina, and with one last hurt look he left, while Ivan even refused to look Nina in the eye. The door closed behind their red keftas and Nina sat heavily on the simple bed she was given, her head bowed.

"What do you want?" Nina asked then and Alina let the tone of her voice wash over her. She took in Nina's appearance - the same clothes as yesterday, her hair pulled in a bun that was falling apart, the tea on the nightstand which she hadn't touched.

"Hello Nina. I am Alina," Alina told her, deciding to take a seat on the chair placed near the small table. She waited in silence until Nina looked up, and waited as the other woman studied her.

"Did he send you?" Nina asked, tense, her stance loud and clear regarding the mistrust she was feeling.

"My husband?" Alina asked. Nina flinched. "The General did not send me, but he is aware of my whereabouts. Does that answer your question?" Alina asked patiently.

"Well, he sure does keep an eye on you like a hawk, then," Nina grumbled.

"He does. I don't mind, because I know why he does it. But I will do the same for him."

"Well Kaz did say he was completely blindsided by your presence -"

"Kaz told you about me?" Alina asked and Nina tensed up again. "So you do know him."

Nina rolled her eyes a bit. "If I didn't I wouldn't be here and well. Not sure if Matthias would be better off, actually."

Alina noted the familiarity with which Nina used his name.

"Your... Fjerdan friend?"

"Ha. I'm sure those two on the outside used much more colorful language than that," Nina said.

"They're all shocked by your actions, it seems, but if they did talk about you, they weren't doing it in front of me," Alina told her.

"Shocked, you say," Nina repeated, her shoulders slumping.

"That's how it seems to me."

Despite Alina's attempt to keep neutrality, Nina seemed to try to regroup and steer the conversation somewhere she pleased - a thing Aleksander did too, only with far more skill, but the pattern was the same.

"What about you? You're their Sovereignia, if I've heard correctly," she said, her eyes drifting along Alina's figure and pausing at her stomach.

"I have no opinion of you, Miss Zenik. Yet," Alina emphasized. "I would prefer to form one by myself, though. You have done something fairly risky, I would say. You have done something that caused lots of concern and dismay to people I care about. But none of them told me how I should be thinking of you."

Nina's eyebrow rose elegantly, in what seemed like a challenge she was unable to pass up.

"Not even your husband? Did he not instruct you that now I am a traitor, a person to be locked up and looked at only in the presence of not one but two heartrenders? I can hear their heartbeats just outside -"

"Them being outside of this room is them acting upon their orders regarding my safety."

"So he *does* watch over you like a hawk," Nina challenged, a demeaning sound in her tone, and Alina felt herself getting frustrated - and by the look on Nina's face, it pleased her to see that her words affected Alina. Perhaps it was just caution, perhaps she had spent too much time with Aleksander, but Alina did not appreciate the control of the conversation being taken away from her. Alina raised an eyebrow in return and focused on Nina, on the way she used what had to be a mask, a carefully crafted impression, to present an image of untouchableness.

But nobody was untouchable - and that included the Black General too, as Alina was well aware.

"The General is not why I came here," Alina said, "like I said, I wanted to form my own opinion of you." She leaned her head to the side, tilting her chin up much like Aleksander often did in discussions that weren't always in his favor, and it worked.

"Why would I reply to anything you want to ask me?" Nina seemed agitated, her leverage gone. Alina elegantly shrugged.

"I have no use of you," she told Nina, carefully choosing her words, and keeping her tone nearly soft. "I do not need you to say anything either, in the end it's the General who decides," Alina paused, leaving the end of that sentence hanging between them. The General would decide what would happen to Nina, and to, Alina assumed, her Fjerdan lover. "But you did say you came for your friends. Assuming you thought of Inej, Jesper and Kaz? Well I wonder, Miss Zenik, if you did notice during the time you have spent with them that Jesper is a Grisha?"

Nina flinched, in a way that let Alina know that she at least suspected it.

"Looks like you noticed. You at least noticed something was wrong with him and it must have looked fairly familiar to you," Alina continued. "And you knew exactly the place where he would be safe."

"Except the General would have killed him," Nina said.

"Or so you thought," Alina replied. "I assume they have told you they were not exactly desirable here?"

"Inej said that Kaz was planning to sell you. The General is not exactly a forgiving type of a man," Nina said.

"No, he is not. But Inej, Kaz and Jesper are not here because the General plans to exact revenge upon them," Alina spoke and it caused the exact reaction which she was hoping for - Nina's eyes were intent on Alina, her breathing rapid. "You would like to know the rest, wouldn't you? I would too, if I were you, because you did put yourself in danger, you have put your friend in danger, all based on wrong assumptions." After a pause Alina got up, forcing Nina to look up at her. Unfair, Alina thought, but there had to be a line drawn and Nina had to be aware that it was in her best interest to cooperate. "I'm willing to tell you, but I will not do it if you plan to talk to me like you just did."

"How should I talk to you then? Pretend that you're my friend or a savior?" There was bitterness in Nina's tone.

"Just be honest," Alina spoke and Nina scoffed. "Yes, the last thing a spy should be doing. I may be new here, but I am not stupid, and my husband certainly does not hold me on a leash or tells me how to think. I am not your enemy. But you have acted like an enemy of your own kind, and I am fairly sure you're aware of that. And I bet that does not feel good, no matter how you might feel about your friends... or Mister Hevlar."

*

That afternoon Alina canceled her meeting with several court ladies, using exhaustion as an excuse. She didn't need to use one with Ivan though - he went willingly to get Aleksander out of his own meeting when she asked, making certain that the bath she had called for was ready and waiting. And surely, her husband hurried to her and she gave him a coy smile when she saw traces of worry on his face.

"I am quite fine. Not sure though what Ivan told you to get you to come here so promptly," she said as she led him to the bathing chamber and he paused to observe the scene - a tub filled with fragrant water, the soap, the bathing salts, the freshly made tea awaiting on a small table that would be within hand's reach to a person sitting in that tub.

"Should I believe you left him with no instructions?" Aleksander asked with amusement and began to methodically strip his clothes. Feeling like a cat that got the cream Alina started to divest herself as well.

"Just that I needed to speak to you urgently," she told him, an eyebrow arched in a playful challenge. His own eyebrow rose in response but he did not speak, not saying that he was annoyed - although possibly he might have been because she abused her power and roped Ivan into her little scheme. But he also did not say that he opposed, shedding his kefta and his new tunic, sitting on a chair to pull off his boots, all the while watching her as she parted her robe, dropped it on the floor and entered the bath.

"I could use something nice and warm to lean against," Alina grinned at him, as he stripped off his pants and his breeches and was finally nude.

"Would this do, Moya Sovereignia?" he asked playfully as he lowered himself into the bath behind her, arranging his long limbs like a cradle around her body. Feeling content and warm, Alina sighed and leaned into him and for a moment she was quiet, enjoying the feeling of his hands gently soaping her upper arms and shoulders, and the way his cheek rested against her hair.

"Mhmm," Alina let her head drop against his shoulder.

"I've heard you visited Nina," he said quietly, rubbing tiny circles with the thumb of his hand against the skin of her shoulder.

"Yes, I did," Alina said, opening one eye and closing it again. "She's tougher than I expected. Or, to rephrase that - I had no idea what to expect."

"What did you talk to her about?" Aleksander asked curiously, his hands stopping. Alina told him about the entire conversation, line by line, along with all of her thoughts, and Aleksander hummed and nodded along.

"It's probably very unfair of me, considering her position, but I did leave her with the impression that I don't need anything from her. That there certainly isn't anything I want, and that she had compromised herself foolishly."

"But you do want something," Aleksander stated. Alina stared at the tops of his knees, sticking out of the water and wondered if he was cold there.

"Of course I do," Alina said.

"And what is that?"

"Oh," she gave Aleksander a pretend innocent look over her shoulder and leaned back comfortably, her body against his solid form. "A resentful, crazed with pain woman whose lover you supposedly murdered in cold blood, one I am forcing to accompany me to all court functions? One willing to enact her revenge? Wouldn't that be a tasty bait for a certain First Army General that we both know?" Alina said and felt Aleksander's smile as he chuckled and kissed the top of her head.

"I like the way you're thinking, my love," Aleksander said.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!